

*Death Came
Softly*

E. C. R. Lorac

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Death Came Softly

By

E. C. R. LORAC



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Mystery House

New York

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1

WHEN Eve Merrion first saw Valehead House she was conscious of a sense of exasperation. House hunting is a weary business, and house agents, in Mrs. Merrion's opinion, enjoyed sending their clients on wild goose chases to view impossible properties. Seeing the size of the great house when she first glimpsed it between the beech trees, Eve Merrion nearly turned her car and drove back the way she had come. Valehead was obviously too big a house for any individual to take as a private residence.

"It's quite out of the question," she said to herself. "It'd be impossible to run it, impossible to get servants, and it's miles away from anywhere, and probably as inconvenient as a house can be."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Merrion did not turn her car and retrace the mile of difficult surface which the agents had described as "the drive." The house might be "impossible," but as she stared at the gracious white building standing so serenely in the sunshine on the little plateau above the water meadows, Mrs. Merrion felt impelled to get closer to it. The dignity of the long Italianate building, so stylized and symmetrical, set among the wild, rich Devonshire woodland, was an experience worth having. Obviously the day would count as another wasted day from the point of view of house hunting, but it promised an experience of unusual beauty which would compensate for waste of precious time and yet more precious gasoline.

She drove on slowly over the rutted, bumpy "drive," the beech woods closing in on her again. On her left the ground rose steeply in a great scarp of red earth and red rock. The branches of the beech trees, clad in the enchantment of Maytime foliage, hung low over the roadway, and the ground below them was misted with bluebells. White cow-parsley foamed over the bank, and the rose-red of campion shone like an enameled enrichment. To her right there was a short, steep drop to the river and the

lakes, and water irises crowded along the water's edge—not only the familiar yellow iris of English water meadows, but flowers of violet and blue and lilac, lovely alien blossoms, were established there. Eve Merrion adored flowers. Gardening was her passion, and she drove slowly on, becoming more and more absorbed, as her eye caught drifts of wild daffodils—their flowers over now—and clumps of the small Italian tulips with-frilled petals which grow wild on the hillsides around Florence.

The drive took a sharp turn to the right and cleared the woods, and Eve Merrion drove on over a white bridge whose delicate ironwork tracery showed the same Italianate design which she had noted in the distant house. She caught her breath as she cleared the bridge and saw the banks of rhododendrons which lined the drive across the river: rose and white, lilac and purple and crimson, the flowers bloomed in a prodigal mass of color which seemed almost incredible. A sharp rise took her up the bank on the farther side of the rushing stream and she swung her car around a curve and up onto the level plateau in front of the south porch of Valehead House.

As she alighted, Eve noticed the trees on the level turf to the side of the house—cedar of Lebanon, cupressus, Irish yew—and a vast magnolia, its glossy foliage almost hidden behind the myriad rose-pink chalices of its great flowers. She had hardly an eye for the house at all; she could only stare at the trees and flowers. Beyond, farther up the valley, camellias were in flower, rose-red, crimson, coral, as vivid and prolific as the trees beside Lake Maggiore. Walking around to the side of the house, Eve Merrion followed a neglected garden path which led from terrace to terrace by a series of shallow steps. She wandered through an overgrown rose garden, past a rock garden whose beauty was almost smothered by encroaching bramble and wild clematis, and a desire seized her to set to work and cut back the choking branches which were killing the dwarf maples, with their fine-cut rose-red leaves, and smothering the primulas and saxifrage and rock rose and gentian. Wandering on, she left the formal garden and followed a wooded glade above the stream until she reached a circular lake half hidden by close-growing trees and shrubs. Bamboos made a thicket at one side: arbutus and eucalyptus shaded it, and close around the waterside were hydrangeas and azaleas. The hydrangeas were only just in bud, but Eve imagined them as they would be in blossom—a veritable sea of blue flowers around the lake where moorhens nested, and herons trailed their long legs as they rose from the shining water. She stood still, listening to the

sound of the river and the bird song all around her: gazed fascinated at the yellow and orange and peach color of the azaleas: saw the rose-red blossom of some strange flowering tree with hanging flowers like fuchsias, and beyond, the banks of rhododendron and the shining camellias. "I don't care what the house is like. I'm going to have it. I *must* have it," she said to herself. "I'm going to be living here when those hydrangeas are in flower."

"So I hear you have taken a house in Devonshire."

Emmeline Stamford looked at her sister with a slight lift of her fine eyebrows, her lips curving in what Eve had once described as "her Mona Lisa smile." Before they were both married Eve and Emmeline had been very good friends indeed, but during the last dozen years they had grown apart, their interests lying in widely diverging directions.

Eve, who had just passed her thirty-fifth birthday, had recently lost her husband. Axel Merrion had been a metallurgist, a man of great intellectual powers yet of marked humanity, interested in all that pertained to the advancement of human knowledge and well-being. Led by his wisdom, fired by his enthusiasm for all that was noblest in human thought, Eve Merrion had developed from a kindly, light-hearted girl into a mature woman of wide information and generous mind. Her sister, Emmeline, had married an officer in the Indian Army, and her environment since her marriage had crystallized all that was conventional in her. "Empire, Prestige, Dignity"—these were Emmeline's values, described laughingly by Eve as "E.P.D." In the narrow sphere of army life and thought, Emmeline had grown into what her sister ruefully described as "a perfect lady, perfect within the limitations of social convention." Emmeline, at thirty-three, was a beautiful woman, still slender, her fine skin unspoiled by tropical suns, though there were wrinkles around her fine dark eyes, and something in her expression told of weariness and disillusionment. Emmeline Stamford was always beautifully turned out, her appearance finished and exquisite, despite the fact of her small dress allowance. Axel Merrion had been a wealthy man—his fortune was now his widow's—but Eve, with an indefinite amount of money to spend on clothes, had she wished to spend it, never achieved the beautifully clad appearance of her sister. Eve had grown stouter as she grew older; her figure was robust rather than elegant, her skin weatherbeaten, her hands showing plainly enough that she enjoyed digging

and potting, but she also had a beauty of her own, and good health showed in her sunburned face and wide-set, clear gray eyes.

Emmeline Stamford was staying in a private hotel in Kensington, and it was here that Eve came to see her a week after her visit to Valehead House. Emmeline eyed her older sister with affectionate amusement, noting that Eve's tailored suit was put on "anyhow," her beautiful brown hair still dressed in a bun screwed up at the base of her fine solid head. Eve pulled off her hat and ran her fingers through her hair in a gesture which recalled the fat, happy, untidy child of twenty-five years ago.

"Yes, I've taken a house in Devon, Emma. I know you'll say I'm mad. I dare say I am mad, but I couldn't help it. The garden—oh, my dear, it's lovely next to heaven. It's simply unbelievable."

"So it may be, my dear—but what about the house? I hope it's not too big."

Eve flung herself down in a chair and laughed, her beautiful white teeth shining like pearls in her wide, generous mouth.

"It's *much* too big, Emma. In fact, it's enormous, but it's perfectly adorable."

Emmeline frowned a little. "Much too big? Meaning? How many rooms are there?"

"I didn't count. Thirty at least. Some of them are perfect, others are awful. There are two great paneled rooms facing the magnolia trees, and a gorgeous entrance hall with a parquet floor, and some really lovely bedrooms—enormous great rooms with vast windows looking right down the valley and over the woods—"

"My dear Eve! A house with thirty rooms . . . it sounds quite mad. Where on earth is it?"

"Miles from anywhere," said Eve cheerfully. "It's about twelve miles from Enster and ten miles from Bewley Abbas, hidden in one of the wooded north Devon valleys. It's the most amazing place to come upon unexpectedly, after driving along miles of narrow twisty roads, sunk between high hedges—that lovely long white house, set among incredible flowers. Emma darling, the sight of all those rhododendrons and camellias was like heaven—'other Eden, demi-paradise' . . ."

“My dear Eve!” Emmeline Stamford’s cool, rather bored voice broke in on her sister’s rhapsodies. “I’m willing to believe that the flowers are marvelous. It’s the house which strikes *me* as incredible. About thirty rooms, miles from anywhere, hidden at the end of narrow Devonshire lanes. . . . It sounds like a nightmare to me. Are you proposing to live in all the thirty rooms—and to clean them—or have you found an incredible staff of servants to run the place? Are there any drains in your dream house, or did you not ask about anything so sordid after you had seen the camellias?”

Eve Merrion laughed again, quite good-humoredly.

“Sorry, Emma. I’m telling things all the wrong way round, just as I always do. There are perfectly good drains, and water supply, and electricity as well. The house has been empty for a year, but some wealthy Americans had it before then, and they put in some super bathrooms, and central heating and an electric kitchen. Everything like that is all right.”

“Then why was this paradise of a house to let?”

“*Because*, my dear, it’s too big for most sensible people to consider, and it’s too far off the main road. Now listen to me, Emma, and you’ll see that I’m not so mad as you think. Admittedly the house is bigger than what I set out to look for, but consider everybody who may come to live in it. First, there’s me, and my three kids, Brian, Dennis and Jennifer, plus old Nanny and Carter and his wife, who are quite keen to try it. Then there’s you—if you’ll only come and share it while you’re in England, and your two boys in the school holidays. Then there’s Father. You know the poor darling is simply aching to find some quiet spot where he can get on with writing his magnum opus, and where he can have room to spread out his books and his papers and his secretary. He would bring Brady and his wife to ‘do’ for him, because he’s used to them, and there’s a caretaker in the house who understands the furnaces and everything, and he would stay on as houseman. It’s really not so mad as it sounds—and it’s awfully beautiful, Emma. You simply couldn’t help being happy there, and children would adore it.”

“I see you’ve thought it out in detail,” replied Emmeline Stamford, her cool, detached voice tinged with the faintest note of acerbity. “It’s true that I said I should like to share a house in the country with you, Eve, but I was really thinking of somewhere in Surrey or Sussex, or even Hampshire. Somewhere easily get-at-able.”

“Yes, my dear. Easily get-at-able—for night bombers. You don’t know what bombing means, Emma, and what security for one’s children means. It may be quiet now, but you never know when hell may be let loose again. No nice get-at-able spots on the bus route for the London bombers for *my* kids, thank you. I thought of that, too. Valehead is so isolated it’s not worth a bomb. The kids will be safe there, if there’s safety anywhere.”

“Yes, I see your point about the children,” replied Emmeline, “but I can’t say that this Valehead place sounds my own idea of bliss. It must be utterly isolated. I was looking forward to seeing something of my friends, you know, after all these months of traveling to get home. I’d rather hoped your little Surrey house would take us. I thought you were fond of it.”

“Five Gables? Of course I was fond of it, in a way, but it was always a second-best, Emma. I wanted to have a place in the country and a garden, and Axel had to be near London. I couldn’t condemn him to hours of traveling every day just because I wanted to be in the country. Five Gables was a compromise between what I wanted and what had to be. It was quite nice in its way, but I always feel that Surrey is really a glorified suburb. It’s all tacked onto London, a sort of dormitory and week-end resort for wealthy stockbrokers, rather than real country. In any case, the house is commandeered, you know. It’s not mine while the war lasts.”

“I see. That settles that,” said Emmeline. “Well, you certainly seem to have taken a plunge into what you call ‘real country.’ You must be paying a small fortune for this Valehead place, Eve.”

“But I’m not! It’s ridiculously cheap. It won’t cost any more than our ghastly great flat in Chelsea plus the upkeep of Five Gables,” protested Eve, and Emmeline Stamford shrugged her graceful shoulders.

“In any case, the cost of it isn’t my business, Eve. I know that, but I’ve had to think such a lot about ways and means that I get rather obsessed on the subject of money. Of course, I realize that you look at things on a different scale altogether.”

Eve Merrion flushed rather unhappily. This subject of money had been a difficulty between the two sisters for years. Eve’s husband had been wealthy, Emmeline’s husband was not. With only a small private income in addition to his army pay, Major Stamford had had all he could do to meet the expenses of educating his children in the way he wanted them to be educated. Any schools other than public schools did not exist in Major

Stamford's opinion, and public schools meant expensive prep schools as a preliminary. Eve Merrion, wholeheartedly generous, had once impulsively offered to undertake the cost of educating Emmeline's older boy. Instead of accepting the generous offer in the spirit in which it was made, the Stamfords had resented it as a reflection upon their own means in contrast with the Merrions', and had refused it in a manner far from gracious. Eve remembered this uncomfortable episode when Emmeline mentioned the topic of expenses in connection with Valehead House, and she hesitated somewhat before she answered.

"I do feel I'm behaving rather like a pig, Emma," she said ruefully. "It's true I gave way to impulse in taking Valehead House. I wanted it so much. It's not the house, although it's a lovely house. It's the garden and the setting. The place once belonged to a childless couple who were passionately fond of gardens. The wife, so I was told, had been brought up in Italy, and she owned a Villa near Stresa. She determined to find an English garden where she could grow the flowers she loved in Italy, and she found the place she wanted in the Vale of Fairwater—Valehead House. It was she who planted the camellias and magnolias and primulas and irises, as well as the cypresses and vines and eucalyptus and tulip trees. She looked after that garden for fifty years, and spent a fortune on it. They say she had fifteen gardeners working on it, and she planted bulbs and flowers of all kinds right up into the woods. She must have worshipped the place. When she died, about five years ago, no one else wanted to look after a garden like that. It's all overgrown and wild, her lovely flowers and shrubs being choked—dying of neglect. When I saw it, I wanted to make the garden live again. . . ."

"With the aid of fifteen gardeners?" put in Emmeline, her voice half amused, half irritated. "I doubt if you'll get them these days."

"Oh, Emma dear, of course I shan't. I don't want to. In any case, the kitchen gardens are being cultivated by a firm of market gardeners, and the woodland rides will just have to go on being wild—they're lovely anyway. But there's a certain amount I *could* do—the rose garden and the rock garden, and the lakeside where the hydrangeas grow. Emma, it's so lovely. When you see it, you'll understand why I wanted it so much. I don't think I've ever wanted anything for my own as I wanted that garden."

Emmeline regarded her sister quizzically. “What a funny woman you are, Eve. . . . You talk about *wanting* something. Haven’t you been happy, then, all these years, with your huge flat in Chelsea and your ‘*pis aller*’ in the suburban county of Surrey? Was life all a ‘*pis aller*’?”

Again Eve Merrion flushed, and this time there was indignation in her gray eyes. “That’s not fair, Emma. You know it’s not true. I’ve been as happy in my married life as any woman on earth could be. Oh, bother, what a silly argument to have! It’s because I always say things so foolishly. Perhaps it’s because I miss Axel so much that I want something to occupy my mind. Children—well, they get awfully independent, don’t they? They seem to resent mothers once they get into their teens. I suppose I want to be wanted . . . although that sounds horribly feeble and sentimental—but that garden *does* want me—and I want to look after it.”

“A passion for gardening is *quite* beyond my comprehension,” said Mrs. Stamford, “so we’ll leave it at that. Tell me some more about the house, Eve. Are you putting Father into a separate wing—with his papers and his books—and his secretary? By the way, is that owl-faced man Keston still the secretary?”

“Yes, of course. Father would be completely lost without him.”

Mrs. Stamford smiled. “Mr. Keston will like the idea of Valehead, Eve. He was always devoted to you, I seem to remember. Darling, you *must* powder your nose, this very minute, *and* do your hair. You look just too frantic. Then we’ll go down to lunch, and you can tell me the really important things about your adored house—omitting all mention of the garden.”

“Well, Father, so Eve has prevailed on you to move at last. You’re really going to live in this fantastic great house she’s taken in the wilds of Devon?”

Professor Crewdon, his glasses resting precariously on the tip of his nose, looked up at his younger daughter from the confusion of papers he was sorting out.

“Yes, my dear. I’m actually moving. The house isn’t fantastic, you know. It’s what I should call a very rational house. It’s interesting, too. Very interesting.”

“Oh—you’ve been to see it, then?”

“Certainly I have been to see it, my dear Emmeline. I shouldn’t decide to go and live in any house which I had not previously examined. Valehead is a very good specimen of its period. It was built in early Georgian times, on the remains of a much older edifice. I am of opinion that the site has had several buildings on it, including, almost certainly, a Roman villa. While I admit that the present house is admirable in many particulars, I greatly regret that its medieval predecessor has been wiped out. The only remains, above ground, are the arch at the entrance gate—an unusual structure—and the so-called Hermit’s Cave nearby.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” broke out Emmeline Stamford, her voice half laughing, half exasperated. “How came a commonplace woman like myself to be a child of yours, Father, and a sister of Eve’s? When I talk to her about houses, she can do nothing but rave about gardens, and when I talk to you about houses, you tell me of Roman remains and hermit’s caves. I *loathe* gardening, and I’m quite certain that the hermit’s cave will give me the horrors. I detest caves.”

Professor Crewdon went on sorting his papers methodically, his blue eyes smiling, his face placid.

“A very unreasonable attitude, my dear. Prejudice is always to be deprecated. The garden, though sadly neglected, is a very fine garden, and contains many rare and beautiful specimens. I noted *Tricuspidaria Lanceolata* in flower, and *Akebia Quinata* also—a very fine specimen. *Safora*, also, and other rare *Leguminosae*, and some remarkable *Ericas*. As for the cave, I can assure you that it is neither noisome nor repellent. A nice, dry, airy cave with some most interesting carvings. I promise myself some happy interludes researching into its history. To return to the house, however, in which you are justifiably interested. It is unusually spacious—”

“So I gather,” put in Emmeline. “About thirty rooms, Eve said.”

“Forty-one in all, if you count the bathrooms,” said the professor equably. “There is a fine portico, having six columns of the Ionic order, faithfully rendered, frieze and cornice in correct proportion—”

The deep voice broke off as the door of the room opened and a bespectacled, scholarly looking man of about forty years of age came into the room.

“Ah, here is Keston. You remember my younger daughter, Keston—Mrs. Stamford.”

“Of course, of course. How do you do?”

Roland Keston, his arms full of papers, looked at Mrs. Stamford with an embarrassed air as he endeavored to shift his load of papers to his left arm and extend his right hand to her. He promptly dropped about half his burden on the floor, and Mrs. Stamford, after a formal bow, said hastily:

“I’m so sorry. I’m afraid that I’m only interrupting you when you are both busy trying to pack. I’ll go now, and leave you in peace—only do tell me, Mr. Keston, have *you* seen Valehead House?”

“Yes, Mrs. Stamford, indeed I have. It is an amazingly beautiful place, and the valley is a paradise for anyone interested in bird life.”

Mrs. Stamford laughed aloud. “I think I must keep a diary, and write down what everyone tells me about this marvelous place,” she said. “My sister tells me that the garden can only be likened to the Garden of Eden—before the fall of man, of course. My father mentions an airy, commodious and generally desirable hermit’s cave. You say that Valehead is a haunt of wild birds. What can an average, domestically minded Philistine like myself find in such a catalogue of marvels?”

Keston had picked up his papers and turned to Mrs. Stamford, his usually pale face flushed. He was a very sensitive man, and quick to resent mockery.

“I think you will find a certain amount to please you, Mrs. Stamford. The house is an impressive property, what the agents would describe as ‘socially desirable.’ The bathroom accommodation is unusually luxurious, the central heating and hot water supply more than adequate. The drainage system, I am told, is beyond cavil. Perhaps these points will outweigh the beauty, historic interest and natural glory of the remote valley in which the house stands.”

The acid voice and scholarly diction caused Mrs. Stamford to frown slightly, but she replied with cheerful flippancy:

“Thank you for your consoling catalogue, Mr. Keston. I shall hope to experience all the civilized amenities you mention in due course. I am sure you will be very happy at Valehead.”

After Mrs. Stamford had taken her leave, Keston still looked irritable and put out. He had been devoted to Eve Merrion for many years, but his

devotion did not extend to her sister. He thought, as he had thought for years, that Emmeline Stamford was an odious woman.

Emmeline Stamford, on her return journey to South Kensington, was also in an irritable frame of mind. For some reason or other her nerves were frayed, and she brooded over the acid exchange of words with Roland Keston, and over what she called her father's intolerable complacency—but it was Keston's remarks which had got under her skin. Sitting in a hot and stuffy bus—and Emmeline loathed and despised buses—she recalled Keston's pedantic voice: “. . . the house is what the agents call socially desirable . . . perhaps this will outweigh its beauty and historic interest.” Her skin prickled with a sense of burning resentment as she brooded over this aspersion, and remembered that her father's eyes had twinkled a little in mild amusement. “The least he could have done was to have spoken to Keston sharply and told him to remember who I am,” she said to herself. “In any case, the inference was quite unjust. I'm *not* a snob.”

As though to give point to this reflection a large and stout member of the proletariat squeezed her ample bulk into the inadequate seating space which remained on Emmeline's right. The newcomer—probably a hard-working and honest charwoman—had been shopping, and her purchase spoke for itself in no uncertain voice. From the all too frail wrappings the scent of fish added to the already mixed aromas of the bus. Emmeline's nose twitched as she tried to withdraw herself from contact with the stout lady's heated person. The latter, cheerful and contented, grinned happily.

“A bit on the 'igh side maybe, but I always says you can't beat a bloater for tea.”

Emmeline felt sick. She got up, pressed the bell and alighted from the bus. A crawling taxi answered her summons and she drove home in solitary dignity. “I *know* I can't afford taxis,” she said to herself. “We're broke . . . and Eve's simply *rolling* in money. It's not fair, but whatever happens I'm not going to ask her to pay Roderic's debts, and as for asking Father, I'd rather kill myself. He'd be sure to tell that insufferable little cad. . . . Forty-one rooms. . . . It's crazy . . . and here am I counting up threepences on a taxi. It's simply *not* fair.”



2

IT was the end of June before Mrs. Stamford traveled down to Devonshire to see her sister's much debated house. Eve Merrion had wasted no time in moving her goods and chattels to Valehead, and by the end of May she was already established there. Her letters to Emmeline had all been full of delighted enthusiasm: Valehead seemed to Eve to be the loveliest place in the world; the weather was perfect, the move had been carried through with a minimum of delay and bother; Professor Crewdon was delighted with his quarters, and the "scratch lot" of servants seemed to be both competent and contented.

Indeed, Mrs. Stamford had felt positively irritated over Eve's delight in her new home. The former felt that the "gilt was off the gingerbread" in her own case. Emmeline had moved heaven and earth, as the saying is, to get back to England in order to be near her own children, and she had longed to be in London again after her four years' exile. Now, after that maddeningly long, slow voyage in convoy, half around the world and back again, Emmeline found herself in a London which seemed alien. Very few of her friends were still living there, and those whom she managed to meet were all preoccupied. Either they were in the services, or doing civilian defense work, or driving ambulances, or doing clerical work in ministries whose location must not be mentioned—whatever it was they were all too busy to join in the small festivities which Emmeline had promised herself. As with her friends, so with the shops and restaurants and hairdressers and places of amusement. Even where the premises were intact, the firms often no longer existed. Restaurants were all full, crowded with people who had booked tables well in advance; hairdressers and court dressmakers had lost their assistants, and worried proprietors were no longer anxious for fresh custom. The light-hearted London to which Emmeline had looked forward was no

longer there, and herself, a comparatively young married woman of leisure, seemed out of the picture. Everything seemed to be a problem—food, service, even laundry, all those things which had been taken for granted so gaily in the old world, were now major problems, crises occurring afresh week after week.

It was sheer disappointment in the conditions to which she had returned that made Emmeline Stamford decide to go to Valehead for a while. Possibly, after the children's summer holidays, she said to herself, she might decide to do Red Cross work, or even drive for one of the services—though having seen something of the trucks and long chassis being driven by nonchalant young women a dozen years younger than herself, Emmeline Stamford felt no enthusiasm in that direction. Several years of life in India had not developed in her luxury-loving nature any capacity for “roughing it.” Emmeline was full of enthusiasm for Empire and Prestige, but dirty work had never come her way, and she looked askance at it.

London, then, being a disappointment, and arduous work unpalatable, she decided to give life at Valehead a trial while she “considered things.” Eve Merrion met her sister at Enster on a blazing midsummer evening. Eve's obvious pleasure in welcoming her sister—and the fact that a car was in the station yard—helped to assuage the irritation engendered in Emmeline by a hot and tiresome journey in a crowded third-class carriage. As they drove out of Enster, and the sweet-smelling country air blew away Emmeline's “train headache,” she began to feel more amiably disposed to her sister and to the promised seclusion of Valehead. Eve, for her part, was both kindly and tactful in dealing with her sister. Eve sympathized with Emmeline's disappointment over conditions in London, over missing her friends, over difficulties of shopping and living, and the drive was spent in an outpouring of Emmeline's small woes. It was not until they were actually within sight of the house that Mrs. Stamford made any comment about her surroundings, though Eve had been conscious all the time she drove of the enchanting Devon countryside, of the rich hayfields, some newly mown, some still white with moon daisies, and all fragrant with the heady, exquisite scents of hay-time. They were driving slowly over the deplorable surface of Valehead drive when Emmeline exclaimed:

“Good gracious! Is *that* it? It does look an imposing house, Eve.”

Mrs. Merrion laughed. Truth to tell, the word “imposing” had never entered her head in connection with Valehead. The beauty of house and setting had won her heart so completely that the word “beautiful” seemed the only appropriate one.

“I do hope you’ll like it, Emma,” she said, almost diffidently. “I know it’s awfully remote, and terribly far from London, but honestly it’s a very comfortable house.”

“How modest you are, Eve. You never even sent me a photograph of it. I had pictured it as one of those rather derelict, rambling country houses that agents love to palm off on the unsuspecting. Actually it looks in very good condition—so white and immaculate—and even I can see it’s fine architecturally, though architecture isn’t in my line. How exciting to be able to take a vast property like that; it looks positively ducal.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad as that,” laughed Eve. “It’s true that it’s rather enormous, but now that Daddy and Mr. Keston and the Bradys have occupied one wing, and the Carters are in the servants’ wing, with Nanny, who’s on her holiday just now, and I’ve got the children’s rooms fitted up, it doesn’t seem so very big. I’ve got lots of room for visitors, of course—I love having people to stay—and I think you’ll like your rooms. They’re lovely and sunny.”

“Good old Eve! How nice of you! If it were my house, I’m sure I should have sent pictures of it to everybody. It really *is* rather exciting!”

When Mrs. Stamford got out of the car and stood on the level sweep of ground in front of the pillared Ionic portico, she glanced around at the wooded parkland, and the sunlit valley stretching away eastward, with something like enthusiasm in her eyes. Remote Valehead might be, but it had a splendor of its own. The beauty of trees and flowers and lawn did not catch at Emmeline’s heart as it had caught at Eve’s, but the dignity and spaciousness of the great house set so superbly facing up the wooded valley gave her a feeling of warm satisfaction.

This feeling did not grow less when Eve led her sister through the pillared white-walled entrance hall and up to a vast bedroom whose windows looked out over the magnolias and cypresses on the lawn. The faint jade-green of the paneled walls had been applied with the cunningest of modern artistry; mirrors were inset just where they were most useful and decorative, and a swinging silvered candelabra gave an air to the formal

charm of the great room. A bathroom opened out from the bedroom, and Eve displayed its mirrored shining perfection with laughing pride.

“When the children came over for the week-end and saw the house, they called this ‘The Duke’s bathroom’ and mine the Duchess’s,” she laughed. “I had to let all of them have a bath in here because they were so thrilled by its splendor. They’re very unsophisticated, bless them. Of course it was the American tenants who put in these bathrooms. English people never squander money on anything so superbly luxurious.”

“But, Eve, I *can’t* understand you saying that the place was *cheap*,” burst out Mrs. Stamford. “It looks *enormously* expensive. What’s the secret about it? Is it haunted? Has it some gruesome history? Was somebody murdered here, or something like that?”

“Nothing like that, my dear.” Eve walked over to the window and looked out happily at the sunny valley. “Cheap is a relative term, of course. What I did say—and it’s perfectly true—is that the rent of this house costs no more than the rent of a big expensive London flat plus the upkeep of a property in Surrey. The reason for Valehead being cheap is that no one would take such a big house so far away from a town. When I first saw it myself, I said, ‘Impossible,’ but here I am, and here you are, and it’s all going to be great fun.”

Mrs. Stamford walked over to the window and stood looking out, beside her sister.

“Oh, who’s that? I didn’t know you had a party staying here,” she said.

On the lawns below, in the shadow of the great magnolia tree, a group of three men were sitting.

“It isn’t a party. They just happened,” said Eve cheerfully. “I told you I liked having visitors, and I hope those two will help to entertain you. The dark man is Bruce Rhodian. He’s an American. Axel got to know him last year. Rhodian is a traveler.”

“I know, the man who did that journey over the Andes and wrote a book about it?”

“That’s the man. He wants to join the R.A.F., but he had a flying accident and isn’t quite fit yet. I know Father wants to meet him. Father’s away this week, by the way. He’s lecturing in London. The other man—the fair one on the grass—is David Lockersley. He’s a poet. I like him quite a

lot. He's awfully shy and difficult to know, but he's very keen on gardens, and knows a lot about rock gardens. He's helping me with the one here."

"Why isn't he in the army?"

"Weak heart and weak eyesight. They won't take him. The third man is Roland Keston. You know him, of course."

"Keston? Horrors! I should say I do. He's an insufferable creature. How do you all live here, Eve? I mean, does Father—and Keston—share meals and everything with you?"

"Oh, no. Father has his own establishment, as it were. The Bradys look after him, and cook for him, and he has his own dining room and all that. I knew it would never work for us to try living '*en famille*.' Father's much too individualist—he's an eccentric, really, in his way of living, and he'd never conform to ordinary times or remember meals. As it is, he can do just as he likes, and I've not got to worry about him. Mr. Keston lives with Father, of course. We just meet in the garden sometimes, but I don't see much of him. He's quite a dear, in his way, although he's pedantic and gauche, and he's a magnificent scholar. Now, my dear, would like some tea sent up here, and then you can revel in a lovely bath in the ducal bathroom, and make yourself look glorious to adorn our dinner table."

Emmeline sighed with satisfaction. "Eve, darling, how nice! I'd no idea I was coming to anything so superb and luxurious. This room is simply perfect. I feel I'm going to be terribly happy here!"

"Oh, Emma, I do hope so. I've looked forward so much to having you. I only hope you won't be bored."

"It doesn't seem a bit boring to me so far," laughed Emmeline Stamford.

"This is just one of the loveliest spots I've seen the world over, Mrs. Stamford, and I've seen some."

It was Bruce Rhodian who spoke. Mrs. Stamford, bathed, changed and refreshed, had come out into the garden with her sister, who had just introduced her two visitors. Rhodian was a dark fellow, about thirty-five, with a lean, bronzed face and bright, dark eyes, attractively set under tilted humorous dark brows. His alert expression and quick, neat movements contrasted with the apparent heaviness and immobility of David Lockersley.

The poet was a big, heavily built young man, with a square, pale face, a shock of rather colorless fair hair, and a face which seemed dull and expressionless save for his heavily set gray eyes. Lockersley had very fine eyes, and very observant ones, but he tended to look downward, away from the person addressing him, and thus his face seemed frowning and rather uninteresting. Eve Merriam, who had made friends with the rather detached young poet on account of their mutual interest in gardens, had told him that he ought to wear tinted glasses. His frown, she was certain, was caused by eyesight which could not stand bright sunlight. He had replied that he certainly could not stand having the world spoiled by viewing it through dark glasses, and Eve understood what he meant. Emmeline Stamford, prone to judge people by a conventional standard of her own, labeled him “rather a clod” at first glance. She preferred the quick responsiveness of Rhodian’s dark eyes and easy speech. Leaning back in her chair, she smiled across at him.

“It is indeed a lovely place. The house is full of charm, and it’s so beautifully set, looking right up this wooded valley.”

“The house looks down the valley,” put in Keston’s pedantic voice. “The head of the valley is in the other direction, behind the house.”

“Who cares?” Rhodian retorted cheerfully. “Technicalities of language leave me cold. Whoever fixed on the location of this house did a good job. It’s perfectly set, plumb in the middle of the valley, so that you see the little river and its series of lakes set between the woods. There’s a symmetry about it, somehow—and my word, doesn’t it smell good, the hay and the flowers? It’s grand.”

Eve was laughing quietly to herself, as she often did, as though enjoying a private joke, and Rhodian turned to her:

“What is it I’ve said now, making you laugh at me?”

“It was your phrase about whoever was responsible for the location of the house. According to Father, you’ve got to go a goodish way back to place the responsibility. He suggested that a Roman villa had once stood here when he first contemplated the site.”

Lockersley put in a word here. “I believe he has a theory now about this level ground on which the house stands being a prehistoric encampment, or something of that kind. He’s found some long barrows up towards Maldon Moor.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, let us eschew archeology and anthropology and all such head-aching topics,” protested Mrs. Stamford. “My youth was haunted by my inability to spell dolichocephalic or comprehend what it meant.”

Bruce Rhodian laughed, his dark eyes surveying Mrs. Stamford with an expression telling of pleasure as well as amusement.

“That’s just too bad,” he said. “We’ll leave out the skulls and the jawbones and homo sapiens in the making, and just enjoy the present without debating our predecessors in this glorious spot.”

Emmeline turned and looked at him laughingly. “Goodness, I’d forgotten. You are an anthropologist, too, aren’t you? You come back from incredibly arduous and hazardous journeys with a collection of bones which all the experts start quarreling about.”

“Don’t hold it against me,” he begged. “It wasn’t I who marred the peace of the evening with words like dolichocephalic.”

“What’s the matter with the word, anyway?” inquired Eve’s placid voice, “it sounds to me an eminently peaceful word, pleasantly redolent of learned societies and unwarlike lecture rooms.”

“But your sister doesn’t enjoy the thought of learned societies and all that,” laughed Rhodian. “She just wants to enjoy a peaceful evening in this garden, untroubled by dissertations on primitive man.”

“Do you always prefer to take your surroundings for granted, Mrs. Stamford?” inquired Roland Keston, peering at Emmeline rather in the manner a scientist might study an untabulated specimen. “Does the thought of previous inhabitants of this wonderful valley merely repel you?”

“I haven’t a scientific or an inquiring mind,” replied Emmeline, “and I certainly find it tiresome to regard everything from the point of view of academic research. I agree with Eve that this is a gloriously beautiful spot, and I’m content to leave it at that. I don’t want to analyze it from the point of view of the anthropologist, the geologist, the botanist or the historian, and that’s that.”

“Would a cigarette amplify the pleasure of the spot?” inquired Rhodian, holding out his case. As he lighted a cigarette for Emmeline, Lockersley bent forward toward Eve.

“Do you feel the same about things as your sister does, Mrs. Merrion? Does the history of the place you live in seem totally unrelated to the place—an irrelevance, almost an impertinence?”

Eve sighed a little to herself. She was afraid this party was going to prove none too easy. Eve loved discussion for discussion’s sake, but she did not want to bore her sister. It seemed evident enough that abstract discussions did not entertain Emmeline.

“No.” Eve’s reply was made direct to David Lockersley. “If I care about a place, I like to know all that I can about it. Actually I have rather a childish tendency to populate these woods with their earlier inhabitants. I imagine all sorts of people—early Britons, and Romans, and medieval folk, inhabiting this valley. I get a bit confused at whiles. Take the Hermit’s Cave, for instance; sometimes I think of real cavemen living there, then I visualize a solitary friar in a rough brown habit, meditating in the archway there. He’s awfully real, my hermit.” She broke off, laughing a little. “I said it was childish, and it is,” she admitted naively, “but I always visualize what Father would call my ‘reconstructions.’”

“But I think you’re probably quite right in your feelings about the cave, Mrs. Merrion,” put in Keston in his earnest, pedantic way. “Undoubtedly it would have been the habitation of primitive man many centuries before any medieval contemplative fashioned it for his dwelling.”

“I say, what’s this about the Hermit’s Cave?” put in Bruce Rhodian. “Is it a leg-pull, or another amenity of the house?”

“It’s not a leg-pull. It’s a perfectly good cave,” replied Eve. “It’s in the great scarp of rock to the south of the main entrance. Legend calls it the Hermit’s Cave, and the carvings in it bear out the legend. If you’re interested, you’d better go and have a look at it. Mr. Keston will take you. He and Father are both very interested in it. Father has actually been sleeping there, but he has most eccentric ideas on the subject of sleeping-places.”

“I should like to see it,” said Rhodian. “We could explore this evening, while the professor is still away, and then we shan’t disturb his meditations there.” He turned to Emmeline. “Won’t you come and explore too, Mrs. Stamford? I’ll run you down the drive in my auto.”

“Heavens, no, thanks very much. I loathe caves,” replied Emmeline. “Good gracious! Who on earth is that?”

A small, bent old man with a very bald head, his person enveloped in a capacious white apron, had just appeared around the corner of the house.

“Mr. Keston, sir, it’s high time ye were in to your meal. It’ll be ready and waiting by the time ye’re seated. Come along now, and don’t let the good meal be spoiling.”

“All right, Brady. Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Merrion, I’d better do as I’m told.”

There was humor as well as kindness in Keston’s usually too serious face as he turned to Eve, and she replied laughingly:

“That’s right, Mr. Keston. Off you go! Brady, I’m glad you’re keeping him in order.”

“Sure to goodness, ma’am, as far as I’m able, though it’s the devil’s own job and all, seven o’clock struck and never a sign of him. You’ll be wanting to wash your hands before you’ll be eating,” he added anxiously to Keston, as the latter went off with the little man quite good-humoredly.

“Well, really!” said Emmeline, as the oddly assorted pair strolled off together. “Of all the fantastic objects. Does he generally come and collect Mr. Keston as though he were a child and lead him to his meals?”

“Oh, Brady’s a dear,” said Eve. “He and his wife have looked after Father for years now, and they make a great success of it—the only servants he’s ever had who really managed him happily. While Father’s away they look after Mr. Keston in their own peculiar way.” She turned to Bruce Rhodian, laughing a little. “You haven’t met my father yet, Mr. Rhodian. He’s an extreme individualist and, as such, very difficult to cater for. Like many learned men, he disregards the routine of the average person. I think night and day are the same to him. He sleeps when he feels like it, and eats when the fancy takes him. Breakfast has no place or meaning in his scheme of things. The Bradys have made one rule, and that they abide by. A proper meal is cooked and served at half past seven every evening, and Brady goes and finds Father and Mr. Keston, and takes them firmly indoors for that meal. For the rest they can do as they like; they can eat nuts or raw carrots and contemplate the sun, moon or stars, or prehistoric man, but at half past seven they are bidden to sit down like Christians—as Brady puts it—to ‘a decent meal.’ I have the greatest admiration for Brady. I think he’s a marvel.”

“I think I like the sound of your father, Mrs. Merrion. I’m looking forward a lot to meeting him,” rejoined Rhodian. “I like the idea of his sleeping in that cave you were telling us about.”

“Oh, that isn’t nearly so mad as it sounds. It’s a lovely place. I should like to sleep there myself and see the dawn over the lake through that little archway. You must go and have a look at it after dinner. Mr. Lockersley will take you. He likes it, too.”

“Delighted,” rejoined the poet, his voice resigned, his expression remote. Eve caught young Rhodian’s eye and nearly laughed back; there was something infectious in the quick humor lurking in his glance as he looked from one member of the party to another, taking them all in.

The sound of a gong came from the house and Eve got up, saying, “Dinner in quarter of an hour, everybody. We always have two gongs.”

“Very considerate,” murmured Emmeline. She got up, too, and stood looking around her, and then slipped her arm inside her sister’s.

“It’s lovely here, Eve, but somehow it’s eerie,” she said.

Eve laughed. “Is it, Emma? I can only see that it’s lovely,” she rejoined.



3

AFTER dinner the party of four had coffee in the garden, while the westering sun seemed to fill the still air with a quintessence of radiance, and the massed colors of the rhododendrons took on an almost unearthly loveliness. Eve, solicitous for her sister's comfort, but still longing to stay out of doors in the glory of the sunset, said:

"Will you find it too cold if we just go and look at the lake where the hydrangeas are? It always looks so lovely in the evening light."

Emmeline shivered a little and drew her fur cape closer around her shoulders. "All right, if it's not too far. It gets cold in the evenings here."

"What about that cave?" Lockersley spoke abruptly to Bruce Rhodian. The former, more sensitive than he looked, had a feeling that Eve would like to be alone with her sister, and his laconic query was his way of telling Rhodian that they might take themselves off for a while.

"Okay. We'll go and prospect, Mrs. Merrion."

"Yes, do—and come and tell me what you think of it," rejoined Eve, smiling at Lockersley.

The two men set off across the lawns, Lockersley leading, until they left the leveled turf and walked through the grass of the rich pasture which sloped down to the river. They followed the stream until they reached the white bridge and crossed it into the shadow of the beeches which overhung the drive. Lockersley strode along, his face set in its habitual frown, ignoring his companion, until Rhodian said:

"Those two—Mrs. Merrion and Mrs. Stamford—are very unlike."

"Yes. I suppose they are. Lots of sisters and brothers are, for that matter," said Lockersley. "Mrs. Merrion's more like her father. You don't

know him, do you? He's an interesting old chap. He was talking about Martin Trent the other day. He was the man who went with you on that Andes expedition, wasn't he?"

"Trent? Yes. What does the professor know about him, though?"

Rhodian sounded surprised, and Lockersley replied:

"Oh, he knew him when he was a youngster. Professor Crewdon held a chair in one of the American universities some years ago, and he met Trent then. He was rather an odd character—unstable was the word he used. He said he'd be interested to talk to you about Trent—and his oddities."

"Did he? Well, poor old Trent's dead, and his oddities with him, and I don't know that I'm keen on post-mortems. Trent came rather a mucker in his college career, but he'd got plenty of sand when it was needed. I've been through some difficult patches with him while our lives depended on our wits—and guts. . . . Lord! This is a gorgeous place, isn't it?"

The golden sunlight was striking through the beech trees, lighting up their smooth gray trunks and the intense red of the rocky scarp behind them, a magnificent piece of color. Rhodian stood still for a moment, staring into the vivid woodlands, his own sunburned face lighted up by the sunset glow. Lockersley, looking at the other, was rather irritably conscious of Rhodian's good looks, his vital aspect and strong, straight athlete's figure. He seemed to fit in with the woods and the sunshine, to become part of the colorful landscape. Lockersley, handicapped all his life by poor physique, almost resented the vigor and vitality of his companion.

"Yes. It's pretty good," he said, scorning to put into words his own feelings about the magic of the sunlit woods. He trudged on over the rough drive, and Rhodian walked beside him, swinging along with lithe, easy grace. It was just when they were approaching the red sandstone pillars at the entrance to the Valehead estate that Lockersley said:

"There's the cave, up there on your right."

Rhodian left the drive and walked over the beech mast to the great scarp of rock where was the shadowy entrance to the cave, and stood staring a moment before he went inside. The entrance was a pointed archway in shape—a lancet—but there was no real arch. The stone had been hewn away to simulate an arch; it gave access to a chamber in the solid rock, some ten feet by eight and perhaps twelve feet high. There was another

lancet cut in the rock at one end of the cave, about five feet from the ground. Along one side was a stone slab, six feet long, with a hollow at one end—the hermit’s bed. At its head a niche had been hollowed out of the living rock. Another cavity had been carved out at the foot of the stone couch, forming recessed stone shelves. In the wall facing the head of the couch a great cross was carved into the rocky wall. Rhodian stood in the center of the cave while his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, green-filtered as it came through the overhanging branches of beech.

“Say, there’s something fantastic about the place. It gives me the creeps,” he said. “Do you really suppose anyone *lived* here?”

“Why not?” Lockersley came into the cave and stood on the dry carpet of leaves which covered the rocky floor. “I can imagine worse places to live. It’s dry, and surprisingly warm, and utterly peaceful. Not bad to wake up on that stone bed and look out into the woods and see the dawn on the lake. You try it. It’s much more comfortable than it looks.”

The stone couch was strewn with bracken and dead leaves, and Rhodian sat down on it and looked out through the arched entrance to the golden glory of the woods outside.

“All right in summer, maybe, but in winter—no.”

“Why not? A good wood fire—the door and lancet are so arranged that the smoke clears away pretty well,” replied Lockersley. “It’d be a damn sight more comfortable than many a Norman castle.”

Rhodian stretched his long limbs out in the leaf-strewn rocky bed and lay there gazing up at the rock overhead. It had been cut away smoothly to simulate the groining and ribs of a crude vault. He sat up with a shiver.

“Yes. It’s not so uncomfortable as it looks, I grant you, but it gives me the feeling that all those tons of rock overhead might fall on me at any moment. I’d rather sleep in the open, whatever the weather. I’d feel safer.”

Lockersley grunted derisively. “Claustrophobic. Depends on your make-up. I like it in here. I understand how the hermit felt in his house. Safe from the world.”

Rhodian went to the entrance and looked out at the radiant woodlands as he lighted a cigarette.

“And the old professor actually chooses to spend his nights in this uncanny place?”

“Yes, quite often. He agrees with me; he has a feeling that a former inhabitant leaves something of himself in the place he has dwelt in. A contemplative bestows something of his own gift on the place where he has meditated. This place has something to give to the contemplative mind. Does that sound sheer drivel to you?”

“No. Not drivel. I should never laugh in this hole, nor yet laugh at it. It gives me the jitters. It isn’t just a cave, a hole in the rock. It’s something fashioned and studied, and rather horrible.” He turned and reentered the shadowy place as he spoke, and then gave a start as he became aware of someone behind him. “Lord! What’s that?”

Lockersley laughed. “The cave’s got him rattled, Keston. He’s dithering with funk.”

Roland Keston’s didactic voice sounded more precise than ever when he answered; he had come up unseen through the woods, and now stood by the arched entrance.

“One of the most interesting things about this place is the effect it has on those who visit it. No one contrives to be impartial, or to be unaffected by it. Some are frightened; some are serene. Some like it very much. Others loathe it unreasonably.”

“What about you yourself?” inquired Rhodian.

Keston laughed, a little snicker of a laugh. “I keep my feelings to myself,” he replied.

He struck a match to light his cigarette as he spoke, and threw the match away while it was yet burning. It fell on a pile of leaves which lay against the rocky wall and ignited them. A trail of blue smoke rose up vertically for about three feet, and then turned and drifted out of the arched entrance. Lockersley watched it, fascinated, and then said:

“Another odd thing about this cave is that it exaggerates enmities, Keston. You dislike me even more when we’re in here than you do habitually.”

“Perhaps the atmosphere of the cave exaggerates the imaginative powers by inhibiting the rational,” replied Keston smoothly. “I suggest that before we all become completely irrational we go outside again.”

Rhodian laughed, and the cheerful normal sound became fantastic on account of the echoes in the rocky chamber.

“My God! This is a ghastly place,” he shouted, and strode out of the cave into the sunset glow of the woods.

Keston stood still for a moment and peered at David Lockersley’s face; the greenish light had a curious effect; it seemed to steal the color from the men’s faces, making them pallid and corpse-like. Lockersley replied to the other’s stare with frowning intentness, though there was a mocking twist to his lips.

“You *do* dislike me, don’t you, Keston? I’d never realized it quite so clearly before.”

“You’re wrong, my dear fellow. I merely regard you as another odd human specimen to be observed and recorded,” replied Keston, his voice more pedantic than ever.

Rhodian shouted to them from outside, “I say, you two, come out of that damned hole before you both go completely bats. It’s just one hell of a witch’s hole.”

“Wrong again,” said Lockersley as he came out into the vivid evening light. “It’s just another odd specimen to be observed and recorded.”

“It’s made me thirsty,” said Rhodian with a grin, “and I’m not wasting much time before I get outside one of the best.”

Lockersley turned toward the drive with him, leaving Keston still standing at the entrance to the hermit’s cave.

“Well, Mr. Carter, I won’t say no, seeing you’re so kind.”

Brady and Carter, who contrived to get through the lion’s share of the housecleaning at Valehead, were given to foregathering at the end of the day to enjoy a peaceful drink after their respective wives had retired to bed. Carter, who knew a good drink when he met one, had already learned to appreciate the excellence of Devonshire draught cider. He had a barrel of it down in the cool cellars below the vast stone-flagged kitchens, and he had drawn off a couple of quarts in readiness for Brady’s expected visit. Carter was a big, jovial fellow nearing sixty, with a considerable capacity for hard work allied to a liking for creature comforts. He sat now in a large Windsor chair, his feet on a stool, his jacket off, his collar comfortably loosened. Brady, a diminutive figure in contrast with the portly Carter, sat on the

kitchen table and swung his feet comfortably to and fro as he addressed himself to the fresh draught of cider.

“This is a rum go, this is,” said Carter cheerfully. “I been in some queer jobs in me time, but this one takes the biscuit. Not that this here place hasn’t a lot to be said for it, times being as they is, and the missis fair scared of blitzes and whatnots, but we’re a rum lot when all’s said and done, no offense meant.”

“Being English, it’s not to be expected differently,” twinkled Brady, and Carter chuckled.

“Now, then, none o’ that, Patsy. English we are, thank God, but some of ’em’s Irish in a manner of speaking. There’s the professor, so learned he’s plain crackers, and that there Mr. Keston of yours, enough to give a man the creeps. It’s a funny thing, Brady. That chap’s going dippy over our madam, if you ever heard of such a liberty.”

“Well, well. So it’s noticing things ye’ve been,” replied the small Irishman. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but you’re slow to see what’s plain under your nose. Any more you’ve been noticing?”

“Umps. Well. Seems to me there’s a lot of tender feeling about,” said Carter. “This bloke Lockersley, a poet I’m told he is, he’s taken with Mrs. Merrion too. Not that I’d mention such an idea to anyone else. Women is rare gossips. My old girl, she’d talk till the cows come home if I let her have her head. You and me, now, that’s different. No ’arm in our having a bit of a nice chat. You know, *I* think it’s the place. Something rum about the place.”

“It’s a grand place,” said Brady. “Never seen a place I liked better. And what if our Mr. Keston *is* fallin’ head over ears in love with your madam, why not? Do him good, maybe. Make a man of him. He’s young, as men go. Must he spend all his best days studying dry skeletons?”

Carter chuckled over his cider. “I wouldn’t say that. No use for bones and suchlike, meself, but it’s a bit rum. Three of ’em, on my soul, your Keston, and that balmy bit of a poet, and that fine young chap Rhodian, all glaring at each other along of our madam—and she never realizing it, bless her. Like a child, she is. Not like that fine lady, her sister. Got eyes in her head, she has.”

“And it’s not liking her that I am,” said Brady. “She’s a hard-faced thing, and grasping. Not like her sister. She’s one to make trouble, I said to Mrs. Brady. You can see it with half an eye.”

“That’s what I call exaggerating,” protested Carter. “You’ve hardly seen her. My missis says she’s a proper lady, meaning her kit’s all posh, if you take me. Hark! What’s that? Footsteps outside.”

Brady cocked his head and listened. “That’s Mr. Keston. He’s a rare one to go wandering round at night.”

“They’d give me the proper creeps, your pair, no offense meant,” said Carter. “Call ’emselfes Christians? You never know where you are with ’em. What with the professor spending his nights in that there hermit’s cave, and Keston wandering around like a heathen Chinee when he ought to be in his bed, it’s enough to make a bloke like me tired.”

“You see, they don’t call themselves Christians,” replied Brady, his eyes twinkling. “They think your heathen Chinee is as near right as the holy father himself. Holy Mary! Wise men can be uncommon foolish—but the professor, he’s a good man—and come to think of it, ye’re all heretics, and he no worse than yourself for that matter.”

Carter chuckled, quite unoffended. “Me, heretic? I was brought up Primitive Baptist if that’s what you mean. Look here, Brady, when does your professor come back?”

“The day after tomorrow, being Thursday. Why?”

“It’s like this. He may be a queer old bird—he is, too, by gum, but I reckon he’s got a bit of horse sense. Brady, I don’t like the way that Keston looks at Mrs. Merrion. It’s a liberty for a chap like him to look at her like he does. And there’s this to it: Mrs. Merrion, she’s got a tidy little fortune now she’s a widow, and I bet Keston knows it.”

“No. You’re misjudging him there,” replied Brady. “There’s one thing Mr. Keston doesn’t care about, and that’s money.”

“All the same, I shall be glad to see the professor back to keep Keston to his job,” rejoined Carter, draining his glass and then indulging in a vast yawn.

Brady laughed to himself. “And it’s a grand imagination you’ve got,” he said. “Don’t you go worrying about things, Mr. Carter. There’s no cause. I’ll bid you good night, thanking you for a real good glass.”

“Good night to you, Brady, good night—and don’t you go telling your missis what I’ve been saying now. Never set women’s tongues wagging, because you never know where they’ll stop.”

“Not like their husbands,” chuckled the Irishman.

“So we shall be rearranging our plans for today, Mrs. Carter.” Eve Merrion was talking over the day’s orders with Mrs. Carter as she always did, talking in the pleasant, friendly voice which everybody liked. “I’ve had a phone message from the professor that he will be back home tonight, instead of tomorrow, and I want him to dine with us, as Mrs. Stamford is here. Mr. Rhodian has to go back to town for a couple of days, unfortunately, but he will be returning later in the week. Mr. Lockersley wants to go for a long tramp over the moor today, so I thought that Mrs. Stamford and I would take a picnic lunch in the car and drive a few miles into the woods. We can’t go far, because we haven’t the gasoline, but we can get far enough to see the view down to the coast, and it’s such a heavenly day it seems a pity not to take my sister out.”

“Very good, madam. I will cut some sandwiches for you and pack the picnic basket. There will be four for dinner this evening?”

“No. Five. The professor and Mr. Keston, Mr. Lockersley and Mrs. Stamford and myself.”

“Very good, madam. Duck and green peas and gooseberry tart—and I’ve scalded some cream for you, the cows are doing that well.”

“Goodness, how lovely! Though I feel guilty over having so many good things. Isn’t it glorious being here, Mrs. Carter? I can’t bear to think of living in a town again, ever.”

“There’s certainly a lot to be said for the country these days, madam,” replied Mrs. Carter, and her tone made Eve laugh.

“You’re a real Londoner, aren’t you?” she said as she turned away.

Half an hour later Eve and her sister got into the small car which Carter had brought around to the front door, and Roland Keston came around the corner of the house to wave to them. Eve called to him, her foot on the clutch, and he came running up as she said, “We shall be back for tea, and Father will be back about six. Remember we’re all dining together this evening.”

“Thank you very much,” he said, standing by the running board, looking rather wistfully down at Eve, while Emmeline Stamford watched him with half veiled amusement in her eyes. She had been quick to see Keston’s feeling for her sister.

“Are you sure those brakes are properly adjusted now?” he asked anxiously. “They were slipping the other day, and the gradients hereabouts are very steep.”

“The brakes are all right, thanks; Carter saw to them, and he’s an excellent mechanic,” replied Eve.

Emmeline called, laughing, to Keston:

“Are you anticipating tragedies? Cassandra-wise? Do you have premonitions of ill?”

There was no answering smile on Keston’s face as he replied, “I do, sometimes, and the results aren’t generally amusing.”

“Really, Mr. Keston, you ought to know better than to cast gloom over a perfect day!” protested Eve. “I hope you’re not going to stay indoors all day and work. Why not follow our example and laze in the sun? You work too hard.”

“Indeed I don’t, and I am going to play truant today,” he replied. “I shall walk up to the Long Barrows on the moor. It is very beautiful up there.”

“Perhaps you’ll meet Mr. Lockersley, and you can meditate together over bones and funerary urns,” laughed Mrs. Stamford as she waved goodbye and Eve started the car off.

“That wasn’t really fair, Emma,” protested Eve. “Those two don’t like one another so awfully well, you know.”

“What a marvel of understatement, darling,” said Mrs. Stamford. “They hate one another like poison, and it’s plain for all to see.”

Eve said some time afterward that that cool, flippant remark of Mrs. Stamford’s concerning Keston and Lockersley hating one another was the first shadow which cast its gloom over the radiance of Valehead. Throughout the sunlit morning, as they sat at the edge of the beech woods and saw the rich Devon landscape stretching out to the sea, Eve was conscious of a lack of ease; talk as she did, gaily enough, discussing old

times and old friends, at the back of her mind was an unhappy feeling about the two men. She was almost glad when a mist came rolling in from the sea, obscuring the hot sun which had been such a delight, and she said that they had better get home again quickly, as the sea mists sometimes became unexpectedly thick and chill. They ran the car down to the valley again and found the weather clear, but cool and gray. On the slopes of the moor to the north a cloud cap had settled, thick and white. Tea time passed, and an hour afterward Keston came in; he came straight to Eve in the great drawing room, where she had had a log fire lighted lest her sister felt the chill of the cool evening, and asked if Lockersley were back. Eve shook her head.

“No. I wish he were back. It looks thick out on the moor.”

“It is. Very thick. Had I known my way less well I should have missed the path. I’m afraid Lockersley may be held up. It’s very confusing up there in a mist like this.”

“Oh, dear. Why did he go? Is there anything we can do?” Eve asked.

Keston shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I’d go out and look for him willingly, but it would be futile in this sort of weather. I did shout once or twice, lest he were within earshot.”

“You didn’t see him, then?” asked Mrs. Stamford.

Keston stared at her question.

“See him? Of course not. I should have told you had I done so.”

There was a moment’s awkward pause, and then Keston added, “I don’t think you need worry at all. There is no danger for an experienced walker in being lost in a mist at this time of year. It is simply a matter of being delayed or losing one’s direction. It’s quite possible to take a path which will lead one miles away from one’s intended destination.”

“Poor Mr. Lockersley! He will miss the duck and green peas,” said Emmeline. “That’s the car, Eve . . . who is it? Oh, it’s Father. He’s got here all right, anyway.”

Dinner was not a very happy meal. The absence of David Lockersley troubled Eve a lot, though the professor and Keston strove to reassure her that there was nothing to worry about in the fact that he was delayed.

“He’s probably settled down comfortably in a sheltered corner under one of the tors and made himself a fire from heather roots,” said the professor. “If the young man has any sense he will know that a mist at this

time of year is a matter of short duration. It will probably be clear again by midnight, and there is a moon to help him on his way.”

Emmeline turned the conversation away from Lockersley by getting her father to expound his theories about the various inhabitants whose activities he had traced in the valley and on the moor. Men of the stone age, Romans, early Britons and medieval charcoal burners interested her very little, and while she listened she watched Keston with rather cynical amusement. At the best of times he was not an easy talker, but he tried to distract Eve’s mind by talking earnestly to her about her plans for the garden. It seemed slightly comic to Emmeline that this earnest, academic creature should be thus attracted by Eve’s warm vitality and motherly instinct.

Dinner passed, and the professor and Keston returned to their own quarters. Emmeline went to bed early, but Eve sat on over the fire. At eleven o’clock the professor came in again, saying that the wind had changed and the mist cleared away, and that Keston had gone out again to search for Lockersley. Carter, it transpired, had a good idea which direction Lockersley had meant to follow in his walk to Maldon Tor, and Keston, who thought nothing of walking thirty to thirty-five miles a day, had gone out to make certain that Lockersley had had no mishap in attempting to climb the famous tor.

“Very foolish of him,” said the professor, referring to Keston. “Even if the young man had got himself into difficulties, which I doubt, it will be impossible to find him before dawn.”

“I wish Mr. Keston hadn’t gone,” said Eve unhappily, and the professor chuckled.

“He did it to please you, my dear. He thought that it might be a consolation to you that somebody was trying to *do* something.”

“The situation is not devoid of humor,” said Eve dryly. “Can you imagine Lockersley’s feelings if he’s rescued by Keston?”



4

It was not until the small hours that Eve fell asleep, and the sun was shining brilliantly in at her window when she was awakened by Mrs. Carter with a tray of tea.

“It’s all right, ma’am. Both gentlemen have come back safe,” she said reassuringly.

“Oh, thank goodness! I’ve been dreaming horrors all night,” said Eve.

She got up and bathed and dressed, rejoicing in the perfect morning, and ran downstairs into the sunlit hall, where the double doors stood open to the sweetness of the morning. Keston was just coming in, a gaunt, unlovely figure in an old Burberry, and Eve had time to wonder why he was using the front door instead of the entrance which he and the professor usually used, before she saw his face, pallid and drawn in the strong morning light.

“Whatever is the matter?” she cried, consternation at his haggard look overcoming all other thoughts. “You’ve been doing too much, you’re exhausted.”

He sat down heavily, shaking his head.

“No. I’m all right. I’m sorry, Mrs. Merrion, terribly sorry. I’ve bad news for you.”

“But Mrs. Carter said he’d come back—David Lockersley, I mean.”

“Lockersley? Oh, yes, I’d forgotten about him. It’s the professor. He wasn’t in his room and I went down to the cave. He was there. He must have—his heart must have—” He stuttered painfully, and then with an effort controlled himself again. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Merrion. He must have died in his sleep. I wanted to break it to you gently, but . . . I was very fond of him, and finding him was a shock.”

To Eve it was as though the sun had suddenly gone out and the morning turned black. She heard her own voice saying:

“Are you quite sure? Perhaps he’s only fainted, or had a seizure. We must phone for the doctor.”

“Of course. I’ll do that for you, at once, though I’m afraid nothing can be done. He must have died some hours ago.”

“What is this you’re saying?” Carter’s voice broke in, just behind them, and Eve made an effort to think, and to act sensibly.

“It’s the professor, Carter, down in the cave. Mr. Keston, phone to Dr. Dark at once, please. Carter, get some brandy, just in case, and then come after me to the cave, quickly.”

Eve ran out of the open doors, across the drive and dew-spangled grass. She ran on until the thumping of her heart warned her to slow up. She should have got the car out, and she realized it when she was hurrying down the drive, half running, half walking. Carter, however, kept his head to the extent of remembering the length of the drive, and before Eve was halfway to the cave he overtook her, and she stood on the running board while Carter drove to the arched entrance near the cave. Eve ran the short distance under the beech trees and entered the cave, whose interior was quite light now with the reflection of the sun off the lake just below—a queer effulgence of cool, greenish light. She knew as soon as she saw her father that Keston had been right. There was something rigid about the still figure which lay stretched on the hermit’s bed, eyes closed, but face turned up to the rocky roof. The professor looked very peaceful, the inscrutable smile of death on his face, almost as though he were happy as he lay in his strange resting place.

Eve went and knelt beside her father’s body, and laid her hand over the cold, rigid hands which were loosely clasped on his breast. The first sense of shock and sorrow which had overwhelmed her gave place to an awareness of the strange peace which possessed the place, and the deep peace in which her father seemed enshrouded. The song of birds, the rhythm of running water and the breeze in the trees, all these mingled with the green filtered sunlight to make this strange resting place seem fitting for its present purpose. She turned her head to see Carter standing behind her, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

“He must have died in his sleep,” she said softly. “Just passed from one sleep to another without knowing it, Carter. I can’t be sorry for *him*, he looks so happy.”

When asked afterward about the happenings of that morning, Eve Merrion always maintained that she had done what seemed most sensible and fitting at the moment. It never entered her head, she insisted, that there was anything other than natural causes to account for her father’s death. Seeing him lying there, so naturally and peacefully, she simply assumed that he had died in his sleep. Knowing him well, it seemed to her neither shocking nor incongruous that he should have died in that strange place. He had loved the hermit’s cave, and declared that he could “think” there better than elsewhere. There was something about its remoteness and seclusion which had appealed to the old man, who had held that meditation was a valuable exercise for the mind.

Carter, however, was deeply shocked at the sight of the professor lying dead on the leaf-strewn rocky bed.

“We must get him out of this, ma’am. I’ll get one of the gentlemen to help. We’ll bring him home for you. You just go along up to the house. We’ll see to it.”

Keston had reappeared a few moments later, while Eve was still in the cave. He had telephoned to the doctor, and had been told that the latter had been called out to a maternity case, and was not yet in. Keston offered to take the car and drive into Enster to find another doctor—there was no other local man within reach. Eve shook her head.

“No. There’s no object. A doctor can’t do anything. We’ll wait until Dr. Dark comes out.”

Keston looked unhappy and helpless, and Carter said again:

“Now you go on back to the house, ma’am. We’ll bring him back for you. It’ll be easier for us to manage without you. There’s one of the estate men working up in the woods there, he’ll lend a hand.”

Eve had agreed, and returned to the house to break the news to her sister, leaving Carter and Roland Keston in the cave. Carter took the initiative.

“We’re going to get the poor old gentleman moved out of this here horrible place and onto his own bed like a Christian,” he reiterated. “We can’t get him in the car. He’s as stiff as a board. . . .” He scratched his head unhappily, and then said, “There’s a gate of sorts outside—used to be put up against the entrance to keep folks out. That’ll do. . . . Now you just go and fetch Tom Briggs, he’s woodcutting up in the clearing.”

Carter went out into the woods and hunted for the barred gate which had once been fitted into the cave’s entrance. Keston went up to the clearing and brought the forester back with him to the cave. Within ten minutes the melancholy little party had started their journey along the drive, with the professor’s body stretched out along the wooden gate. As they had raised him from his rocky bier, Keston had muttered: “Ought we to move him? Perhaps it’d be better to wait until the doctor’s seen him.”

“Leave him in here?” protested Carter indignantly. “That I *won’t* do, I tell you straight. I’m going to take him home. Leave him here, indeed. Never heard of such a thing—a horrible hole like this.”

Keston was tired, and he was never good at giving orders. He let Carter have his way, and trudged beside his master’s body in the glory of the morning sunlight.

“Police? What on earth have the police got to do with it?”

Dr. Dark sighed. Like Roland Keston, he had had a weary night, and he would have been glad to be in his bed, rather than facing other people’s problems. Also he liked Mrs. Merrion, and would gladly have saved her added distress. He replied gently and patiently to her puzzled question.

“I have told you that I can’t sign a certificate, Mrs. Merrion. I had not been attending your father, and I cannot be certain of the cause of his death. In these circumstances I have to inform the coroner, who will order a post-mortem. That is a routine matter inevitable in the circumstances. I am very sorry to distress you, but the police will probably make their own investigation. The whole matter is—somewhat obscure.”

“Obscure? I know you think it extraordinary that my father should have slept in the cave, but then you didn’t know him. He wasn’t like other people. He often did odd things.”

“Quite so. Learned men often seem eccentric to more ordinary ones. I am not questioning that point at all, and believe me, I am very sorry indeed to cause you any further distress.”

“It’s not that. It just seems rather silly. . . . Father died in his sleep, of heart failure, surely? It wasn’t as though he was hurt in any way, or—”

Eve broke off and stared at the doctor for a moment, her eyes wide with distress. “Surely you don’t think that his death was due to anything but . . . natural causes?”

“I can’t tell you, Mrs. Merrion. That is why a post-mortem is essential. He had been dead for several hours before I examined him, and I can form no opinion.”

Eve’s face stiffened and the color faded from her cheeks. She was silent for a few seconds, and then said quietly:

“Of course you must do whatever is right in the circumstances. I didn’t think. . . . I know he had some trouble with his heart, and seeing him lying there so peacefully it seemed obvious he had died in his sleep.”

“Quite, quite. I think you are right on certain points. He *did* die in his sleep, from heart failure, but the law requires that I ascertain the cause of that heart failure before a certificate can be given. Er—I don’t want to distress you, but in the circumstances I should advise that whoever was staying in the house last night should stay on here for the time being, on account of the necessary inquiry.”

Eve sat very still and then replied, “I understand. I will see to it. You will let me know just what arrangements are to be made?”

“Of course—and I will do my best to spare you any trouble that I can.”

Dr. Dark was glad to get away; he was sorry for Mrs. Merrion, but he viewed the matter of the professor’s death with grave misgivings. In unprofessional language, he thought it was a damned funny business.

“This is the place. Queer hole to choose to sleep in, isn’t it? But they all say the old chap was a bit odd. A law unto himself, as the saying is.”

It was Inspector Turner of the Valehead constabulary who spoke; beside him stood Chief Detective Inspector Macdonald, C.I.D. Turner had come with Macdonald to show him the Hermit’s Cave, and also to air some of his,

Turner's, theories. The acting chief constable had been much exercised in his mind about Professor Crewdon's death. A very detailed and patient investigation seemed indicated, but it was a difficult matter for the local force, at present overworked and undermanned, to spare the time and the men for a case which might turn out to be a wild goose chase. As the chief constable said, there was a perfectly obvious explanation to the case, and it might well be the right one. On the other hand, the explanation might be murder. Harassed and perplexed, the chief constable had appealed to Scotland Yard, and the Yard, in the person of Chief Inspector Macdonald, now stood at the entrance to the Hermit's Cave.

Macdonald, who was a Scot, and far from lacking in imagination, stood in the cave until his eyes became accustomed to the green gloom within. He saw the hermit's bed, leaf-strewn, noted that the cave was neither damp nor clammy, and that the sun-warmed air from without moved pleasantly through it. The leaf-covered floor was dry beneath his feet, and through the lancet slit of the window space he could see the golden green of the sunlit woods. Macdonald sat down on the stone couch and gazed out through the arched door space to the sunlit lake and he replied, as David Lockersley had replied to Bruce Rhodian: "I can imagine many worse places to sleep. The professor was an anthropologist, wasn't he, and interested in archeology. I expect this place appealed to his imagination."

"Well, I'm not up in 'ologies myself," replied Turner. "Give me a proper bed to sleep in, clean sheets and a spring mattress. If the old man had died of lumbago I could have understood it."

"But he didn't die of lumbago. He died of carbon monoxide poisoning," said Macdonald meditatively. "Now what about this charcoal?"

Turner was leaning against the arched entrance, and he pointed to the wall which was parallel with the hermit's bed.

"There's a niche there. You'll see it as your eyes get conditioned to this half-light. In the niche was a brazier; it's been upset now, and its contents tumbled all over the floor. There was charcoal in the brazier, I suppose, and there's a whole heap of it behind, in the niche. Charcoal gives off carbon monoxide when it's heated. I suppose the professor lighted the brazier to warm himself, and then fell asleep, and the gas settled him."

Macdonald, who could now see clearly in the half-light of the cave, got up and went to the recess in the rocky wall which Turner had pointed out.

As he approached it he felt the dry charcoal sticks crack and crumble under his feet. An ironwork brazier, with a grid bottom and a tripod stand, lay overturned near the recess. Macdonald turned his flashlight on the ground and picked up a piece of the charcoal.

“Do you know how this stuff came to be here?” he asked. “Did the professor obtain it?”

“No, not exactly. It’s ancient history, like the cave; also, like the cave, its origin is a bit uncertain. Scholars say that there was a charcoal burners’ settlement in this valley in olden times. According to an old fellow in our village, one charcoal burner lived and carried on his trade as late as Victorian times. He sold the stuff to the folks who lived in Valehead House. The owner had lived abroad and got used to the charcoal stoves such as the French peasants use, I’m told. What’s more certain is that there is still a pile of charcoal in an old stone hut in the woods. It’s quite possible that some of it was stored in this hole. On the other hand, the professor may have carted some of it in here to warm this place. It wouldn’t make any smoke, which would be a recommendation.”

Macdonald nodded. “Quite. Can no member of the household give you any information on that point? This man Keston, for instance? Doesn’t he know anything about it?”

Inspector Turner snorted derisively. “Keston? I’ve never met such a fool as that man appears to be. He doesn’t know anything about anything—not about anything useful, anyway. He’ll babble on about charcoal burners’ settlements centuries ago, but he knows nothing about any charcoal or brazier in this cave. Never noticed it. Says he’s short-sighted, which he is.”

Macdonald considered the recess in the wall of the cave and then said, “Taking the dim light into account, it’s quite possible, probable even, that a man with quite good eyesight would notice neither charcoal nor brazier, unless he examined the place with a torch or a lantern.” He turned the beam of his flashlight on the rusted brazier. “No hope of fingerprints on that,” he said.

Turner nodded. “None whatever, nor on anything else in this hole, either. Just rocks and dead leaves, and a trampled heap of charcoal. Who on earth can make anything out of evidence like that? I asked if the brazier was upset when the body was found. Nobody knew.” He gave an exasperated exclamation. “If only they’d had the sense to leave things alone; if they’d

left the body where it was as they ought to have done, we might have come to a clear conclusion. As it is, nobody can tell me anything. They didn't notice, didn't think. Just trampled all over everything and destroyed any hope of evidence."

Macdonald returned to his seat on the hermit's bed. "Intentionally, do you think?" he asked.

Turner shrugged his shoulders. "Difficult to say. I don't like that man Keston myself. He's said to be a scholar and a very clever chap. He just looks a fool when I talk to him. Didn't notice anything. He found the professor was dead, though. Also he was out all night when the old man died, and he gets quite a useful legacy under the will."

"All points to be noted," agreed Macdonald. "What about the other man, Carter, who helped to move the body?"

"Oh, he's no need to pretend to be a fool. He is one, by nature. He and the forester who helped to move the body just galumphed all over the place. They probably did knock the brazier over, but they never noticed it."

"As you say, quite probably," agreed Macdonald. "Now look here. I know you're busy and you want to get back to your own jobs. I can put in an hour or so quite usefully examining this place, and my man can run you back to the village and then come back for me."

"Thanks. That'll suit me down to the ground, though I reckon you'll be tired of this place sooner than you think." He stared around the cave with an exasperated expression. "If only they hadn't been in such a hurry to move the body, we could probably have cleared the whole case up in half an hour. I think the probability is a thousand to one that the professor lighted that brazier, went to sleep and was poisoned by the gas through his own fault. If you try out any other theories they all fall down somewhere, don't make sense."

Macdonald nodded. "It's a way theories have, but the thousandth chance has to be considered. I'll let you know what I make of it, and maybe go straight home again if I find the thousandth chance too improbable."

"Oh, stop the night down here anyway," protested Turner. "I'd been looking forward to a talk. Life isn't too exciting in these parts."

"Lucky for these parts," chuckled Macdonald. "I've had enough excitement to last me for a long time."

When Turner had gone, Macdonald made a careful examination of the cave, aided by his flashlight, but he found nothing to note; just the trampled charcoal, the overturned brazier and dry leaves and bracken.

He then set the brazier on its feet again, put in some dry twigs which he collected outside, topped them with some leaves and lighted the twigs. He then sat down on the hermit's bed and watched. The smoke from the twigs went up in a slender column of smoke, but it did not spread out and fill the cave. The draught blowing in from the lancet slit turned the smoke toward the arched entrance, where it drifted out into the open air.

After a while Macdonald lay down on the stone slab and looked upward. Some of the smoke rose up to the roof and spiraled about in fantastic wreaths, but none of it spread down to the stone bed. The draught from the lancet kept it whirling toward the larger aperture of the entrance, and the lower part of the cave remained clear. Macdonald watched it for quite a long time, and the longer he watched it the more convinced he became that no concentration of gas was possible in the cave while the lancet and the entrance were open to the air. In some odd, primitive way the cave was properly ventilated by its two apertures. This peculiarity, of course, accounted for the fact that it was not damp and noisome, as are the majority of caves. There was no spring of water trickling anywhere down the rocky walls, and the through current of air kept the place dry and wholesome, at any rate in the summer season, probably throughout the year.

Macdonald's next experiment was an endeavor to ignite some charcoal in the brazier, a task at which he was unsuccessful. The dry twigs flared up and burned out quickly, without igniting the charcoal sufficiently to keep it glowing. Macdonald gave a whistle and sat down again to think. In order to ignite the charcoal until it glowed, it would be necessary to make quite a sizable fire, or else to have some means of producing a steady draught. Censers used in churches had charcoal in them, as Macdonald knew; the charcoal was lighted, incense sprinkled on it, and the censer was then swung to produce a draught to keep the charcoal glowing. Now not only was there no pair of bellows in the cave; there was also no heap of wood ash to indicate that twigs had been lighted in sufficient quantities to start the charcoal fire glowing. One means or the other must have been used if the brazier, packed with charcoal, should achieve its purpose and develop glowing heat to warm the cave.

Macdonald went down on his hands and knees again, and with his flashlight reexamined the floor of the cave. There was no white wood ash save that produced by his own twig fire. He collected samples carefully, and found that there was powdered ash such as charcoal might produce after ignition, but none of the ordinary wood ash which burning twigs left as a residue. It seemed to him to present an exceedingly interesting problem. A man had died in the hermit's cave. Medical evidence gave the cause of his death as carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide was caused by glowing charcoal, and there was plenty of charcoal in the cave and a brazier in which it might have been ignited, but there was no evidence as to how the charcoal had been caused to glow.

After some further consideration Macdonald went outside and looked around. He walked along the rock face and studied the ground carefully. It was quite easy to see where the ground had been walked on, for it was thickly covered with dog mercury and bluebell leaves. To walk on them was to leave a trail of trodden foliage. There was a distinct path from the drive to the cave's entrance, and the ground within a few inches of the cave was bare of plants. Anyone could have walked to the extremity of the rock scarp, where the lancet was cut in its western face, without leaving any indication of their steps, but if they had strolled among the undergrowth, there would have been signs of their passage.

He went on back to the drive and turned to look at the entrance to the drive. There was an ancient sandstone arch in the wall at the entrance. It was gateless and provided no barrier now, though Macdonald guessed that when the arch was built, probably in medieval times, it would have been fitted with heavy gates. He walked toward the arch, and as he approached it he saw his own car reappearing along the road leading to the Valehead drive. He stopped the driver when the car was just under the arch, and the driver looked out with regret on his face. "Home again?" he inquired.

Macdonald shook his head. "Not yet, Reeves. I think we've got a case here."

Reeves grinned. "Suits me, sir. Never seen a bit of country I liked better. I could do with a week or so of this."

"So could I," returned Macdonald. "Not sure I couldn't do with a lifetime of it. I can't imagine what perversity makes us live in towns. Keep the car where it is for a bit. I want to climb on the roof."

Detective Reeves never asked questions about his superior officer's actions, but he was always interested in watching him. Macdonald climbed onto the roof of the car and inspected the under side of the arch. When he got down again, he said to Reeves:

"If you were asked to describe that arch, what would you say about it?"

Reeves replied promptly, "It's an old structure, probably hundreds of years old, and built solid as a house. It's just big enough to let a small pantehnicon through, now the gates have been taken off. The gates were taken away when Mrs. Merrion's furniture arrived, the vans couldn't get through unless." He paused and then added, "There's a fixture for electric lights at the top of the arch; I suppose they lighted the drive in the good old days before all this ballyhoo started." After another moment he concluded, "That's about all, though it seems silly to have that great hefty arch and no gates to it."

"It does, rather," agreed Macdonald. "Now we'll go on up to the house."



5

“CHIEF INSPECTOR MACDONALD? How do you do?”

Eve Merrion had been gardening when Carter had brought her Macdonald’s card, and her heart had sunk with an unhappy foreboding. She was sick of answering questions; sick, too, of the veiled suspicion which she had sensed behind the civil police interrogatory. Coming in from the garden, she had expected to find another edition of the local inspector, to whom she had taken an intense dislike.

The tall, dark fellow standing by the window looked quite unlike what she had expected. He stood easily, with a natural poise, and somehow he seemed to fit into the setting of the Valehead morning room, as though he might have belonged there. Meeting his gray eyes, as he turned and bowed to her, Eve found herself addressing Macdonald “as a human being and not as a policeman,” as she phrased her own reaction.

“How do you do,” he replied. “I am sorry to bring you in from your garden on a day like this; sorry, too, that I have to bother you again when you have been so much distressed.”

The quiet voice, with its pleasant Scots timbre, gave Eve Merrion a deep sense of relief. She was sensitive to voices.

“Thank you so much for saying so,” she replied. “It’s true that I—we—have suffered distress. Not so much because of my father’s death, though we loved him dearly, but because of the beastliness of all this suspicion.”

She broke off, ashamed of the manner in which her last phrase had burst out, but Macdonald replied:

“I understand perfectly well what you mean. It seemed to you that the professor died peacefully in his sleep, in a strange and beautiful setting

which he probably loved, and now you are being badgered with unlovely questions.”

“That’s exactly it,” she replied impulsively, “and surely it’s all so unnecessary.”

“I’m afraid that it isn’t,” answered Macdonald.

Eve gave a sigh; she glanced once again out of the window at the sunlit lawns and the long shadows of the cypress trees, and then she turned to Macdonald.

“Please sit down and tell me just what you mean,” she said.

Macdonald took the chair she indicated and when she was seated, he said, “Forgive me if I go over points which are probably familiar *ad nauseam*, and I will try to tell you just what I do mean. First, did you know that your father was in the habit of lighting the brazier in the cave?”

“No. I never heard him mention it.”

“Was he a smoker?”

Eve looked surprised. “No. He never smoked.”

“When you emptied his pockets, did you find a box of matches in them?”

“Not a box. A book of matches, almost new. He often carried them so that he could light a cigarette for me.”

“There was no petrol lighter in his pockets?”

“No. He didn’t possess one.”

“Have you ever tried to light a lot of charcoal packed in a brazier?”

“No. Never.”

“Believe me, if you tried to do so with a match—or matches—from a book, you would hardly be likely to succeed.”

Eve stared at him and then ran her fingers through her hair in perplexity. She answered at length. “How silly of me. Of course we thought of that. He would have lighted some wood first.”

“So I imagined. You are a gardener, aren’t you? You know all about wood ash. How is it that there are no traces of wood ash on the floor of the cave?”

Again she stared at him. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Then how did he light the charcoal?”

“I don’t know,” replied Macdonald quietly. “I don’t think somehow that he would have made a fire of twigs. Twigs flare, and make a good deal of light. No conscientious man breaks the blackout regulations these days, even to the extent of letting a light shine out from a cave. We all know too well what the consequences for other people may be. It is possible to light charcoal by putting a container of methylated spirit below it and lighting the spirit. The light from that is negligible. I should have expected your father to use a method like that, only there is no container in the cave.”

“Oh, dear!” Her cry of distress was like a child’s. “You are trying to prove that he could not have lighted the charcoal, but any other theory is ridiculous. You can’t imagine that someone else went into the cave and lighted the charcoal without waking him. I know that couldn’t be true. Father was a sound sleeper—he could sleep through the London sirens—but he always woke up if anybody went into his room. Ask Brady. He knows that. I know it, too. I have nursed Father when he was ill, and though I didn’t make the tiniest sound he would wake up if I put my nose inside the door of his room.”

“That is an interesting point,” said Macdonald. “I felt pretty certain myself that no one could have been inside the cave without waking the professor.”

“Then how did it happen?” she cried. “Don’t imagine I haven’t tried to find an answer. I know that carbon monoxide is present in exhaust gas, and in coal gas. . . .”

“Quite true, but the experts who performed the post-mortem are sure that exhaust gas does not supply the answer, nor yet coal gas. Both of these leave a characteristic odor which can always be recognized. I think the charcoal gives the answer. My problem—what I am here to discover—is how the charcoal was ignited. I want you to help me by answering questions as accurately as you can, even though I know you are weary of answering questions.”

“I’ll honestly do my best,” she replied, “but there is so little to tell. Would you like me to tell you what I remember in my own words, and you can stop me and ask anything you like.”

“By all means,” replied Macdonald. “Will you start the previous evening, when your father arrived? Tell me exactly who was in the house, and what you were all doing, just as though you were narrating it for the first time.”

She sat back in her chair and thought for a moment before she began.

“I’ll start from the time my sister—Mrs. Stamford—arrived. She came on Tuesday evening, June twenty-fifth. I had two guests staying here at the time, Mr. Rhodian and Mr. Lockersley. They are both fairly well known writers and you may have heard of them. I knew that my father wanted to meet Mr. Rhodian, and I asked David Lockersley here at the same time thinking that they might amuse one another.” She paused here, and then added, “The reason that I start with the Tuesday evening is that it was the last time everything seemed settled and commonplace. I can’t quite tell you why, but after that evening everything seemed to go wrong a bit.” Her eyes sought Macdonald’s almost apologetically and she added, “I’m probably putting things rather stupidly, exaggerating, but when I think back I seem to snatch at that Tuesday evening as the last time when Valehead seemed the utterly peaceful place it had been when I first came to it. It’s probably imagination on my part, because I’ve been worrying over things so much since.”

Macdonald nodded. “I know quite well what you mean. In any time of stress one has a tendency to look back and say, ‘At such and such a time everything was all right.’ Now you can tell me just what you mean by saying things became unsettled.”

“I was expecting my father to come on Thursday evening. He phoned through late on Tuesday to say that he was coming a day earlier—on Wednesday. Then Mr. Rhodian had a phone call from town which made it necessary for him to go up to London unexpectedly. Those were both trivial things, of course, but they seemed to upset the evenness of things. The next day, Wednesday, after Mr. Rhodian had left, I took my sister out in the car and we picnicked in the woods. Mr. Lockersley went for a tramp over Maldon Moor by himself. A mist came down in the afternoon, and by the evening it was very thick. Father arrived all right, and we had been meaning to have dinner all together—Father, and Mr. Keston, his secretary, my sister, Mr. Lockersley and myself. However, we had to dine without Mr. Lockersley because he hadn’t come back, and I was worried about him.

Later, when he didn't come in, Mr. Keston went out to look for him. They were both still out when I went to bed, about midnight. However, when Mrs. Carter called me in the morning she told me they had both come in, and I felt enormously relieved, and then, when I came downstairs, Mr. Keston was just coming in at the front door, and told me about having found Father in the Hermit's Cave."

She broke off abruptly and then added:

"I don't know why I have told you all that long rigmarole. None of it has anything to do with—your problem. I suppose I have been muddled and confused and wanted to talk things out to unburden my own mind."

"That's just what I want you to do," replied Macdonald. "Part of my problem is to get an understanding of conditions here. Now I wonder if you can tell me anything about the attitude, each to each, of the people you have been mentioning—the three men, for instance, Keston, Lockersley and Rhodian."

She looked at him in a puzzled way, her hand again running through her thick hair in a nervous gesture. "They hardly knew one another," she replied. "They only met a few days before. Mr. Keston has been Father's secretary for years, and I seem to know him so well that I just take him for granted. I like him, and trust him, as my father did, but he's not at all an attractive person at first sight. Very few people like him at first, because he's gauche and pedantic and rather tiresome. David Lockersley can't stand him, though he tries to be polite to him on my account. I think Mr. Rhodian thought Keston was merely funny, with that pedantic manner of speech and ultra Oxford accent."

"And Lockersley and Rhodian, how did they hit it off?"

Eve laughed rather ruefully. "Oh, not too well. I hoped they would entertain each other and enjoy being here together. Actually they looked at one another as suspiciously as two strange dogs, but their antipathies were only on the surface, just the silly casual dislike clever men often take to one another. Why do you ask?"

"It's only that I'm trying to sense the atmosphere of this house, to get to know something of the people who made up this small world, and so get a background against which to envisage events. Detection can't be carried out by merely considering what can be called the mechanics of a case. It's the human factor which counts, and it's that which you can supply."

Her face shadowed and grew brooding and unhappy as she protested. "But all these trivial things I've been telling you, they have no bearing on what actually happened. They can't have. If you'd asked me how those three men stood with regard to my father, that would be more understandable."

"How did they stand with regard to him?"

"Roland Keston was devoted to him. He loved him dearly, in his own queer reserved way, and he was happy working with him. Keston feels utterly lost now. His world has just gone to pieces."

"And the other two?"

"Bruce Rhodian didn't even know Father. He wanted to meet him, because he knew Father's work, but they had never seen one another. Lockersley knew Father slightly, and liked him in his rather shy way. I mean they were quite happy together, and enjoyed each other's company, even though they didn't talk very much. I remember my father saying one day about Lockersley, 'That young man has the gift of courteous silence,' and I knew what he meant."

Eve suddenly got up and moved across the room to the window and looked out at the sunlit garden.

"I just can't understand it," she cried. "Somehow I'm convinced you must be wrong. You are telling me, as gently as you can, that Father was murdered, and I can't believe it. Surely you must have overlooked something which gives the explanation—some small, trivial thing." She stopped in her quick speech and flushed. "I'm sorry if I'm being rude, and rather stupid, but this place, Valehead, it's a little world all by itself. It seems cut off from all the big world's troubles. We were such a peaceful household, with Father and Roland Keston and the Bradys, who adored him, and Mr. and Mrs. Carter, both devoted to me, and Rhodian and Lockersley, both just courteous kindly visitors, and my sister and myself and old Bonner, the caretaker. No one ever comes near Valehead at night, it's so isolated. If you believe that Father was murdered, you must think that someone who was in this house murdered him, and it's ridiculous. It doesn't make sense. Not my sort of sense, anyway."

"I'm sorry," replied Macdonald. "I can understand your point of view so well, and in what you have just said you have touched upon certain truth. Valehead is a little world of its own, isolated, as you say, approached by

only the one road, and it seems very improbable that anyone traveled that road on Wednesday night. That's why I have got to know all about those who were in the valley that night. Then you said that I must have missed some small, trivial thing. I think that's true, too. It's often the small trivial thing which gives the clue to a problem."

"Then you *do* think that it might have been an accident, and that all this horrible suspicion about murder and murderers is just a ghastly mistake?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't think that," replied Macdonald gently, "but I've got to go on asking questions until I prove to myself that I'm not mistaken."

As he spoke his last word the door opened and another woman looked in. Eve Merriam said quickly:

"All right, Emma. Come in. This is Chief Inspector Macdonald of Scotland Yard. My sister—Mrs. Stamford."

Emmeline Stamford met Macdonald's eyes with a glance such as she might have bestowed on an intelligent Hindu, remote, condescending and faintly tinged with dislike.

"How do you do?" she said, her bow very formal and dignified. "I am afraid that you may not realize that my sister finds these endless questionnaires more than a little wearing."

"Oh, Emma, don't be absurd. What does it matter if I find things wearing or not? I realize this has got to go on. It's got to be settled, one way or the other." She turned back to Macdonald. "Do you want to see everybody in the house, in the usual way? Mr. Lockersley is still here, and Mr. Keston is in my father's study. The servants are in the kitchens. Shall I send for them for you?"

"No, thanks very much. With your permission I'll seek them in their own quarters, if you don't mind my wandering round the house."

"Of course not. Go where you like. Do what you like." Eve turned again to her sister. "Emma, you'd better know now what the chief inspector thinks. He believes that Father was murdered, that his death could not possibly have been accidental."

Macdonald watched Mrs. Stamford's face and saw it whiten until the lipsticked mouth looked rather ghastly.

"I don't believe it," she replied. "It's absurd, melodramatic. Father hadn't an enemy in the world; he was much too kindly to make enemies,

besides—oh, it's so utterly improbable! Nobody, except the members of this household, knew that he slept in the cave. Is the chief inspector assuming that one of *us* murdered him?"

"I'm not assuming anything, Mrs. Stamford. It's too early in the day to make assumptions," said Macdonald. "All that I can say is that I think the local police were right in believing that the professor's death is a problem which calls for investigation. Once again I should like to express my sympathy with your sister and you over the distress to which you are subjected. Now, with your permission, I will wander round the house."

His last words were addressed to Eve, and she nodded in acquiescence.

"Of course, and do tell me, before you go away, if you find anything—which helps to explain."

As he closed the door, Macdonald heard Mrs. Stamford's voice.

"Oh, Eve, *why did you ever come here?*"

When Macdonald left Mrs. Merrion with her sister, he stood for a moment in the entrance hall. The front door, its double doors standing open to the sunshine, was flanked on either side by long windows; at the farther end of the hall two archways, on either side of a fireplace, led to the inner hall, where was the main stairway, and passages, to right and left behind the stairs, leading on one side to the kitchens, on the other to the southwest wing where Professor Crewdon's quarters were situated. Macdonald, coming quietly out of the sitting room, stood still a moment when he saw a tall, fair-headed young man standing by the front door, apparently intent on examining a row of electric switches in a box to the right of the door. The glass-fronted box was open, and the young man was experimenting with the switches, without result so far as the electric lights in the hall were concerned.

As though he became aware of Macdonald's silent scrutiny, the young man wheeled around and stared at him. As he stared his rather sullen face lightened and he took a step forward.

"Hallo. I suppose you're the Scotland Yard chap—but we've met before, haven't we? I seem to remember you."

"Yes, I think we have. You're Mr. Lockersley, I take it?"

Macdonald looked again at the square, palish face with its deep-set, rather frowning eyes, and then recollection dawned on him and he laughed a little.

“I remember. I didn’t know your name, though. We met on the top of Hard Knott Pass and walked down and crossed the Duddon Valley. It was raining.”

“God! I should say it was raining—and we argued Berkleyan metaphysics to the tune of that Oxford limerick:

*‘There was a young man who said God
Must find it remarkably odd,
That the sycamore tree
Still continues to be
Though there’s no one about in the quad. . . .’*

We went on over Wrynose, and the rain left off just as we got to the top and saw the Langdale Pikes. How funny. . . . I remember wondering what you were, and put you down as an ex-schoolmaster—and you’re Scotland Yard.”

“Yes. I thought you were a Communist with leanings to Soviet culture. Do those electric switches really interest you, or were you fiddling with them absent-mindedly?”

“No. I wasn’t absent-minded. I very seldom am. I was wondering what lights they controlled. None, apparently.”

“Probably the lights in the porch, and beyond. You’d better be careful you haven’t left any on.”

“It wouldn’t matter. All the outside bulbs have been removed.”

Lockersley took a step through the open doors and stood in the wide portico, taking out his cigarette case. Macdonald followed him, and then Lockersley asked in a lowered voice:

“I suppose the fact that you are here indicates that the old man was murdered?”

“It indicates that an inquiry is being made. Have you any suggestions to offer?”

“Me? No. None, at the present moment. I can’t see any point in his being killed. He was a kind old chap, much more tolerant of human idiocy

than I am. There was nothing spectacular about his life or his work, good though it was, I believe. Anthropologists don't possess the kind of valuable secrets that scientists do, or men working in hush-hush ministries. In short, I can't see any point in murdering him in a cave to provide an exercise in detection."

"I'm quite sure that he wasn't murdered to provide work for my department, and there's a possibility that he wasn't murdered at all, of course."

They had left the porch and wandered slowly on to the wide terrace, looking down the valley toward the red sandstone scarp beyond the lake. Lockersley came to a halt, staring at the sunlit vista with frowning eyes.

"Carbon monoxide," he said meditatively. "I saw his face when they brought him in. I knew then, from the color of it. They oughtn't to have moved him, ought they—but Keston has the brains of a louse apart from his own subject."

"Oh, it was natural enough to move him," replied Macdonald. "For one thing, in the green light of the cave no one would have noticed the color of his face. They just assumed heart failure, and the rest followed."

"Yes, I suppose so. Then they got busy with theories about charcoal." He turned and faced Macdonald. "If you got that brazier going with the charcoal alight, do you really think the cave would get full of gas? There's a good through draught between the door and lancet. I noticed it particularly when Keston dropped a burning match on the floor of the cave one evening, and some leaves smoked a bit."

"Quite true, but it wouldn't have been necessary to *fill* the cave with carbon monoxide. The chemists say that two parts in ten thousand is lethal. However, it's all very nebulous at present. But since you are here, and I am here, would you like to give me an account of your own doings that night?"

Lockersley smiled. "I thought that would be coming. Assuming you could find any reason for me to have murdered the old boy I do look pretty fishy. I was out nearly all night, you know."

"Say if you tell me about it in your own words."

"Right. It was very simple. I went off for a tramp over Maldon Moor. I thought Mrs. Merrion would like a day alone with her sister, and if I cleared off she wouldn't have to worry her kind heart by entertaining me. It was a

damned hot morning, an absolute scorcher. I did about twelve miles, and climbed to the base of the crag on the top of the moor. It was slow going, because it was so hot, and I sat down about two o'clock and ate my sandwiches. I think I must have got a touch of the sun, because I lay down in the heather after I'd eaten my sandwiches and went to sleep like a log. I woke up because I was cold, three hours later. By that time the mist was round me like a blanket, absolutely thick. You couldn't see a thing."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes, so I was told—result of a sudden drop in temperature to seaward. What did you do?"

"Cursed, vigorously, and then cursed again. I felt a damned fool, caught out like any cockney hiker. I hadn't a compass, and I couldn't remember which direction I was facing. I knew that if I went downhill trusting to luck I might well land in a bog. There are some deep ones to the south of the tor. Thinking it out, I came to the conclusion that I might as well stay put for a bit, because I knew the summer mists don't last long, not like the winter variety. My head ached, too—sunstroke or eye-strain or something—so I burrowed down in the heather to keep myself warm and went to sleep again. When I woke up the light was fading, but the mist was thinning a bit. I stayed where I was until I'd smoked my last cigarette. By that time it was dusk—nearly eleven o'clock by our summertime reckoning—but the mist had cleared off and I could see a star or two. I set out and made my way downhill, none too easy on that rough ground. I kept my direction pretty well, though, because I could see the pole star. I struck the woods above the head of the valley, up there to the west, and then I knew where I was. I got back to the house between two and three after climbing the fences round the deer park and wading the stream. Not a bad walk. I was feeling pretty fit again by that time, and could have gone on for hours, only I was damned hungry. I found the front door open and went to the kitchens to find some food. Carter was up, snoring in the armchair. He found me some food and we made tea, and wondered when Keston would blow in. He'd gone out to look for me—silly damn fool thing to do. He must have known the chances of finding me were nil, but Mrs. Merrion was worried, and he's a chivalrous sort of bloke."

Macdonald nodded. "Thanks for the recital. The trouble is there's no means of proving it. You didn't meet anyone at any stage of your walk, I suppose?"

“Not once I’d cleared the estate—about mid-day that would be. Once on the moor I might have been the only soul in creation. Same with Keston. He went up through the deer park, by a more orthodox route than the one I came by, and through the gates on the border of the estate. Of course he didn’t meet anyone. If we’d only been at the other end of the estate, and come up the drive—well, we might have seen something that would have helped you, but neither of us was within a mile of the Hermit’s Cave.”

“What do you make of Keston?”

Lockersley shrugged his heavy shoulders. “Not much. He dislikes me, for one thing. When I’m anywhere about he emulates a hedgehog, head well in, prickles well out. He’s a decent chap, I believe, and a useful scholar, but a marked introvert. Sensitive as hell, and hates you to know it. He was devoted to old Crewdon; he’s got a capacity for selfless devotion, but he’s an irritating beggar, all the same.”

“Why does he dislike you?”

Again Lockersley shrugged his shoulders, and a grin twitched his mobile lips. “Why not? A number of people do. Likes and dislikes are fundamentally irrational. Keston loathed me the minute he set eyes on me, and he hasn’t got to love me any more on further acquaintance. I think for one thing he resented anybody else coming to stay here. He liked the place to be—” Lockersley broke off and laughed a little. “I’m doing a lot of talking, and a fair amount of rot at that. It’s all quite irrelevant from your point of view, moreover. My attitude to Keston, and his to me, can have no conceivable bearing on *your* question—who killed Crewdon, and why? Certainly Keston didn’t. If ever one man was devoted to another, Keston was devoted to Crewdon.”

As they talked the two men had walked slowly along the length of the house and up on to the terraced levels of the rose garden, where Mrs. Merrion had been at work clearing away the weeds. Macdonald turned and looked across the valley to the wooded slopes opposite, and something in his face told Lockersley that he appreciated the valley to the full, but he made no comment on its beauty, turning back to the other and saying:

“You mentioned a short while ago that Keston was in the Hermit’s Cave with you some time, and that he dropped a match there. When was that?”

“It was the evening before the professor’s death. Mrs. Stamford arrived after tea, and we all sat in the garden blethering—a rather tiresome party,

with that ass Rhodian practicing his manly charm on Mrs. Stamford, and Keston bleating pedantries at intervals. Someone mentioned the cave, and Rhodian said he wanted to see it. I took him along there after dinner, mainly to get him out of Mrs. Merrion's way. She was looking a bit frayed, as well she might, with all of us talking at cross-purposes. Keston must have followed us down the drive, because he came into the cave while Rhodian and I were still there."

"You were there for some time?"

"Oh, about five or ten minutes, I suppose. I was rather interested to see how Rhodian reacted to the cave. It's a queer place, you either like it or dislike it. He loathed it, said it gave him the jitters. Queer, you know. He's a very commonplace tough, not enough imagination to animate a flea, but something in that cave made him almighty anxious to get out of it."

"While you were there, did anybody mention the professor's habit of sleeping in the cave?"

"Why, yes. Rhodian said he wouldn't sleep there for any money—he had the feeling that the rock would fall on him or something—but so far as the professor's sleeping in the cave was concerned, that wasn't news. We were all aware of it."

"Did you notice a brazier standing in a niche in the rock?"

"No, not then. I'd seen it before. I suppose it was there on that occasion, but I didn't register it."

"When Keston came along, did he join you as though he were glad of company, conversationally, so to speak?"

"No. He doesn't enjoy casual conversation, least of all mine. I think he came along to see what we were up to, and rather resented us being there at all, as though we were intruding in the professor's bedroom."

"And he dropped a match on the ground?"

"Yes. It set light to some leaves and I remember noticing the odd way the smoke coiled up and found its way out of the entrance without filling the cave. Incidentally, if you want to see Keston, there he is snooping around. He has taken to watching me. He's convinced I bumped old Crewdon off. Why, God knows, unless he thinks I have a diseased mind which designs futile murders as a *jeu d'esprit*."

Macdonald saw Keston's thin, dark-clad figure standing a few yards away; he seemed to be contemplating the little pool in the rock garden, and something about the droop of his narrow shoulders was dejected. Seen in the sunshine, in the gaiety of that beautiful garden, he looked out of place, an unlovely, melancholy figure of a man, in an environment to which he seemed alien.

"Go and talk to him. Perhaps you can cheer him up. He needs it." Lockersley's brooding eyes had an impish gleam, and Macdonald wondered what nature of mind had its being behind that enigmatic countenance. He had read some of Lockersley's work, and admired its skill, even while being exasperated by the satirical, angry mind which inspired the bitter verses with their queer rhythms and vivid word painting. Lockersley called across the garden:

"Hi, Keston! Come along and be subjected to a little skilled analysis, and practice a little in turn. Here is Scotland Yard on our tracks."

Keston looked his distaste: he stood still, frowning, staring as Macdonald walked toward him, and Lockersley with a wave of his hand walked away toward the head of the valley. Keston bowed to Macdonald across the lily pool, a courtesy which seemed comic and artificial in that sunlit setting of woodland and wild, lovely garden.

"Chief Inspector Macdonald? Mrs. Merrion told me that you were here. I shall be interested to know if you have formed any conclusions about this most unhappy matter."

"Conclusions are for the final chapter, Mr. Keston. I can be said to be at work on the prologue."

Macdonald made his way by a rough little stone path to the place where the other was standing, and Keston stared at him in a half surprised, half melancholy way. Macdonald thought the professor's secretary a rather pathetic figure, but his face was an interesting and intelligent one. Seeking around in his mind for some manner of making contact with the man, Macdonald said:

"It seems probable that you knew Professor Crewdon better than anyone else in this place. You worked with him, and thereby knew something of his mind. I should be interested to know if you have any ideas on the subject of his death."

Keston took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief, an unconscious action which Macdonald judged to be indicative of thinking, and at length the other replied:

“It is difficult to say that I have any ideas. I have thought about nothing else these past days, but my mind is confused. The whole thing seems unreal, a very horrible fantasy. I don’t believe that the professor lighted that brazier himself. I asked him several times if he did not find that the cave was cold, but he said no; somehow it retained the day’s warmth, and even in the early morning the temperature did not drop unduly. That is true, I know. The rock seems to get warmed in the sunshine, and the cave is a pleasant place at nights.”

“That being so, assuming that the brazier was lighted, as it appears to have been, can you suggest how it was done if the professor did not light it himself?”

“I can’t, I can’t!” cried Keston. “That is the maddening, the distressful part of it. Unless he were unconscious, no one could have entered the cave and lighted the brazier without his being aware of it. One’s mind travels on the most improbable speculations. Could he have been killed elsewhere, and his body conveyed to the cave after death?”

“I very much doubt it,” said Macdonald. “He was a big man, and heavy, and it would have been difficult to carry his body even a short distance—difficult for one man, that is. Besides, there is this to consider. It seems overwhelmingly probable that his death was caused by someone in this household. No one outside, so far as can be ascertained, knew that he was in the habit of sleeping in the cave. No one outside would know of the existence of charcoal in the cave. Assuming then that someone in this household was the culprit, one has to remember that two inmates of the house—yourself and Mr. Lockersley—were out that night. It was quite uncertain when and how you would return. I don’t think any murderer would take risks carrying a heavy body about when any moment he might be surprised by a belated walker coming upon him.”

Keston nodded, looking owlsh in his extreme thoughtfulness. “Yes. I see your point, but consider what you imply. This household, you say. There was in this house that night the following persons: Mrs. Merrion and her sister, Mrs. Stamford, the professor’s daughters. Myself and Mr. Lockersley, for some part of the night, at least. Carter and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs.

Brady, the professor's servants. One of these, you say, was the culprit. Take the servants first. They all knew that Lockersley was out, and that later I went out in search of him. They had no means of knowing when either I or Lockersley would return. Carter was in the kitchen when Lockersley came in, and Brady appeared in the kitchen a little later. Had either of them been absent when Lockersley and I returned, their absence would have been noticeable. I agree with you that, if either were possessed by murderous impulses, they would not have chosen that night to put them into execution."

"Unless some circumstance, unknown to us, made it necessary for the murderer to act on that night," replied Macdonald meditatively. "In other words, if the professor's death was caused by fear that he would discover some malpractice or crime which had occurred here, haste might have been a necessity to the murderer."

Macdonald watched Keston's anxious face, seeking to learn what was going on in his troubled mind. The man's distress was evident; his brow was furrowed, his forehead beaded with sweat. To Roland Keston the professor's death was far from being a merely academic problem.

"I can't imagine any circumstance which would implement such a theory," he said slowly. "Brady and his wife have been with the professor for years. The Carters are devoted to Mrs. Merrion. I can't believe that they are involved, the supposition seems ridiculous to me. Moreover, the method used indicates a subtlety and skill in no way consistent with their attainments."

"In other words, although you agree that the criminal is probably to be found in this house, on examination you find each individual to be incapable of the crime," said Macdonald.

Keston flushed. "I find it hard to formulate suspicion of people I have known and trusted for years," he said, "and I hesitate to go further. . . . It might well be said that I myself am in the position of a suspect. I know that you must consider that contingency, ludicrous though I know it to be. I was out that night."

"So was Mr. Lockersley," said Macdonald, "and so far as can be judged, his absence from the house was caused by the accident of the mist arising, a circumstance which he could not have foreseen."

Keston mopped his forehead. "Inevitably, I have considered the possibilities of Lockersley's absence," he said slowly. "Lockersley knew—in common with the rest of the household—that the professor was returning here on Wednesday night. Assuming that Lockersley be involved, there is a lot to consider. He said that he went to sleep up by Maldon Tor, and when he awoke the mist was thick around him, a statement impossible to prove or to disprove. One thing seems clear to me: if Lockersley were indeed involved, he certainly would not have gone to sleep. If he were not asleep, he would have seen the mist rolling in, and would have descended from the moor. The mist would have served as a useful cover for his actions, and for his absence, but why, in heaven's name, should he have planned such a crime? What possible motive could have lain behind it? As you justly say, I have known Professor Crewdon for many years. I know of no one who could have held any enmity against him; he was the most lovable of men, the kindest of friends, generous to a fault, kindly to all. He was kind and friendly to Lockersley, as he was to all young men. He was even indulgent towards his execrable verse, and admired his skill—"

Again Keston broke off, and Macdonald observed:

"You dislike Lockersley yourself?"

Keston frowned. "Since you ask me, yes I dislike his attitude to life, his moral code, his manners, his speech, his ingrained habit of mockery. Yes. I admit that I dislike him, but I try to be fair to him even in my dislike. I regard him as the one person in this house who could be regarded as a potential criminal. Seek out his record among those who know him. You will find much that is vicious to his account. I tell you I hated to see him in this place."

Something in Keston's last phrase gave Macdonald a key to the feeling seething in that troubled mind. It was jealousy which sounded through the pedantic accent, and jealousy is a very potent force.

"Thanks for being so straightforward with me," rejoined Macdonald. "It makes matters easier for me if people are willing to admit their own attitude to those about them in a case like this. Tell me, when you went out to seek for Lockersley that night, was your action dictated by the instinct to go out and seek for a fellow-being who may be in danger?"

Again Keston's thin face flushed. "No. I am afraid that I was not actuated by pure humanitarianism," he replied. "It was all the same to me if

Lockersley had fallen into a bog in the mist. I knew that Mrs. Merrion was distressed about his absence, and I thought it might relieve her mind if a search was made.”

“I see—but you saw no signs of him that night?”

“None at all. I have been up to the tor since, to see if I could find any token of his having been there, but without result. I do not know; again I do not know.”

When Macdonald left Keston he strolled back toward the house, and saw Mrs. Stamford sitting in a deck chair on the lawns which bordered the terrace, and decided to take the opportunity of talking to her while she was alone.

The C.I.D. man had made certain inquiries about the tenant of Valehead House before he left London. Axel Merrion had been a very well known man in the City of London, and it had been easy to find an acquaintance of his who could give the sort of outline information which Macdonald wanted. Mrs. Merrion was held in respect and affection by her husband’s friends, and one of these latter had also commented on her wealth. “She ought to get married again. . . . It’s difficult for any woman—and most of all for a young and attractive one—to be as wealthy as that. She’s likely to be pestered by fortune-hunters, and how the deuce can she manage her affairs properly without a man to help her? Of course, her sister will be wanting to have a look-in; that’s probably why she came back to England. Not that I’m casting any aspersions. Mrs. Stamford is straight enough.” Macdonald had persisted with further inquiries about Mrs. Stamford, and had learned that the latter had been trying to raise money by the sale of some shares she had bought in a Chinese trading concern some years ago—shares which might conceivably recover their value in the course of time, but which were, to put it mildly, “highly speculative” in the present state of world chaos. “They’re in debt,” was the verdict on the Stamfords. “You can’t play polo and bridge and poker, and entertain on a large scale, and educate children at expensive boarding schools on the pay of an Indian Army major, and if they invested most of their money in the East, well, God help them.”

“Wouldn’t Mrs. Merrion help them?” Macdonald had asked dryly, and his stockbroking informant had chuckled.

“Of course she would, but there’s such a quality as family pride. Silly, but there it is.”

These thoughts were fresh in Macdonald’s mind when he walked over the grass toward Mrs. Stamford. She looked up at him with a start, her face contracting so that it showed the lines the merciless tropics had wrought on her carefully tended skin.

“I’m so sorry to bother you—I know that you and your sister are weary of answering questions,” said Macdonald, “but since some further questions have to be asked, will you answer them now?”

“If it’s really necessary,” she replied. “As there is nothing I can tell you which throws the least light on the matter, it’s only waste of your time. However . . . shall we go indoors?”

“No, not unless you wish to. It’s very much pleasanter out here.”

Macdonald sat down on the grass, facing toward the river and not directly toward Mrs. Stamford. He was aware of her tenseness, and that she sat with every muscle braced.

“When you first came here, on the Tuesday evening, were you conscious that there was any attitude of constraint or unease between those in the house?” he asked, and was aware that Mrs. Stamford was staring at him.

“What a strange question,” she commented. “No. If there were any constraint or tension, I was quite unaware of it. My sister was very happy with her guests, and delighted with this beautiful place. Of course, there was my father’s secretary. You have met him, I take it?”

“Mr. Keston? Yes. I was talking to him a moment ago.”

“Then perhaps your question is more intelligible. He is a very tiresome, difficult creature, gauche and abrupt and argumentative. To some extent his presence spoiled the pleasantness of the party, but that is just a triviality. Social solecisms cannot be of any interest to you. Apart from him, everything was delightful.”

“Do you remember who suggested that the three men, Mr. Rhodian, Mr. Lockersley and Mr. Keston, should go to see the cave?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t remember. You should ask my sister. She has a much more accurate memory than I have.”

Macdonald smiled. "It's rather a relief to meet someone who does not claim to have an accurate memory," he observed. "Many people claim it as against few who own it."

"That's so true," replied Emmeline. Her voice was more normal now, Macdonald noticed. He had often observed that if witnesses can be led a little way along the path of general conversation, their guard was often relaxed a little. Emmeline Stamford obviously had a social sense. If she could only forget that she was talking to a policeman she might become reasonably intelligent, was Macdonald's unspoken thought. He went on:

"I expect you have noticed that if several people, all present at the same event, are asked to describe that event, their descriptions will vary according to their own mentalities and training. The artist will comment on color contrast and form, the financier on money values, the psychologist on behavior and so forth."

"Yes. Of course. My husband always sums people up in terms of riding. If they can't ride, they're nowhere."

"Quite. Now I think that you would notice people's behavior, including their speech, accent, manners, considerateness and so forth."

"Yes. I think I do. Hence my dislike of Mr. Keston. Do you know, I think I'm right in saying that it was he who raised the subject of that ghastly cave. I know that Mr. Rhodian asked me to go to see it, but I loathe caves. Nothing would induce me to go near it."

"You have not seen it, then?"

"Indeed I have not. I will never go near it, especially after what has happened. The mere thought of it gives me the horrors. When I heard that my father made a habit of sleeping there, I thought that he must be quite mad. It's inconceivable to me that anyone could *choose* to spend a night in such a place. I'm not a very courageous person by nature, and I should hate to have to spend a night in the open, but I'd rather do that than take shelter in a cave."

"That particular cave seems to have the quality of either attracting or repelling people very strongly," said Macdonald. "Did any of the men make any comment on the place when they came in that evening?"

Mrs. Stamford wrinkled up her nose as she pondered. Her suspicious and rather haughty manner had changed to something much more natural as

they talked. "I don't think they mentioned it," she said. "My father telephoned just before Mr. Rhodian and Mr. Lockersley came in, and then a call came through for Mr. Rhodian, and I went to bed quite early. The next morning, though, I remember that my sister asked Mr. Rhodian what he thought of the cave—it was at breakfast, and I wasn't actually there because I had breakfast in my room—but Mrs. Merrion told me that Mr. Rhodian had said that he thought the cave was a most repellent place."

Macdonald asked if he might smoke, and Mrs. Stamford replied quite easily:

"Oh, of course, please do," and accepted a cigarette from the proffered case. Macdonald noticed her hands as he lighted the cigarette for her—thin, nervous hands, finely shaped and beautifully kept, but tense as though the muscles of them could not relax. He went on:

"When your father came back here in the evening, can you remember his saying anything which indicated that he was troubled in mind in any way, or which explained his change of plan in returning a day earlier than he had intended?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing at all," she responded quickly, and then went on: "Of course, we were talking about that rather tiresome creature, Mr. Lockersley, who was out on the moor. My sister was worried about him, and then at dinner Mr. Keston was with us. His presence is quite enough to vitiate any intelligent conversation, in my use of the word. I went to bed early, feeling that the evening had been rather a trying one."

"Yes. I expect that there was a rather uncomfortable feeling, with Mrs. Merrion bothering about her missing guest," said Macdonald evenly, and she retorted irritably:

"It seemed to me quite absurd; if David Lockersley could not look after himself, he had no business to go for long walks alone across these moors. My sister was in no sense responsible for him."

"Quite. Are you a good sleeper, Mrs. Stamford?"

She gave a start at the unexpected question and replied by a query, her voice sharp again:

"Why should you ask? I don't follow the relevance of the question."

"I will put it in another way. Did you sleep soundly on the Wednesday night?"

“Yes. . . . I mean I slept soundly when I *did* get to sleep. Actually, I took some bromide . . . I was still awake at midnight, and I always feel so wretched if I don’t sleep.”

“Yes. It must be very wearying,” replied Macdonald. “I expect that it is very quiet here at night. Did you hear any sounds outside at all?”

She was breathing quickly now, but she hesitated a little before she answered.

“I heard Mr. Keston go out . . . about eleven o’clock. He was talking to Carter on the terrace—just the sort of inconsiderate thing he would do. I didn’t hear anything else, except some wretched bird which kept on chirruping.”

“You didn’t hear Mrs. Merrion come upstairs, or the professor go out?”

“No. My sister is always very quiet, and Father was in the other side of the house.”

“Yes. Of course—but he would have passed under your window if he kept to the drive.”

“I didn’t hear him,” she said quickly, “but then I shut my window because that bird irritated me so, and I loathe the sound of owls calling. I didn’t like the idea of Father sleeping in the cave. He was an old man, after all, and anything might have happened.”

“Did you try to dissuade him from going there last night?”

“No. I wish I had. . . . I can’t tell you how much I wish I had . . . but he would not have taken any notice of me. He always laughed at me a little and told me that I was as full of fears as an egg is full of meat.”

“When he told you that he was going to sleep in the cave on Wednesday night, was anyone else present?”

“Oh, but he didn’t tell me. He didn’t say a word about it.” Her voice was sharp with insistence now. “I had no idea he was sleeping there on Wednesday. Eve had said that she believed he was coming back because he liked sleeping in the cave better than sleeping in London. Perhaps she did give me the impression that he was sure to sleep in the cave when he came back here, or that may be only my own imagination. I’ve been thinking and worrying so much that I tend to get confused between what is real and what I have imagined . . . but I’m *quite* certain that Father didn’t say anything about sleeping there that night.”

She spoke quickly, her words uttered in staccato emphasis, and there was only a slight pause before she went on: "I'm sorry. I told you that I couldn't tell you anything which would help. I only wish I could. All I seem able to do is to worry myself into a fever over it. Before you came I was quite certain Father's death was due to an accident. It seemed so natural that he should have lighted a fire to warm himself, and the idea of charcoal seemed obvious, too, because it doesn't make any smoke. I know that, because some of the Indian peasants use it in braziers. By no means everybody realizes that it can be dangerous. I *still* believe that it was an accident. Anything else is unthinkable."

"I fully realize your feelings, and your sister's, in that respect," said Macdonald, and his voice was kindly. He paused a moment and then continued, "Nevertheless, it is my job to investigate every possibility. This question must arise: was there anybody who, for any reason at all, could have wished Professor Crewdon's death, or was there any circumstance which might provide a motive—enmity, fear, or desire to profit?"

Emmeline Stamford was holding herself rigidly now, her face was harsh and set. "I can imagine *no* such circumstance," she said, "none whatever. I am convinced that any theory of the kind is utterly erroneous."

Macdonald had the feeling that she had suddenly shut up, as a shellfish might. As though regretting her own willingness to talk, Emmeline closed her lips in a hard, thin line and fell obstinately silent.



6

DURING the remainder of the day Macdonald interrogated everyone else in the Valehead household. Carter gave a straightforward description of his visit to the cave when he and Eve Merrion saw the professor's body lying there. Carter said bluntly that it was owing to his own insistence that the body had been removed so promptly. He would have considered it neither right nor proper to leave the body lying "in that there heathenish place." Whether the brazier had been standing upright or knocked over he could not say, he had noticed nothing but the professor's body.

"A shocking thing, I thought it," he said to Macdonald. "Many's the time I've said to Brady, 'He's asking for trouble, spending the nights in that there hole,' but I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him lying dead there, so peaceful like, just as though he was sleeping."

Macdonald next asked what Carter himself did during the Wednesday night.

"Madam was all in a fidget along of Mr. Lockersley being out," replied Carter. "I told her I'd sit up, and keep the doors unbolted, so that when he came in I could get him a bite of somewhat. Brady sat up with me until after twelve and then I dozed off a bit in me chair. I was asleep when Mr. Lockersley came in, after two o'clock it was. He was feeling as happy as a game cock, and hungry at that, and tucked into a good slab of pasty my missis had left for him. I made a pot of tea, and we were having a yarn when Brady came down, him being anxious a bit. Mr. Lockersley, he was mad with Keston for having gone out looking for him. 'What did he want to do that for?' he asks, as though the answer wasn't plain enough."

"And what was the answer?" asked Macdonald.

“Why, Mr. Keston wanted to cheer up Mrs. Merrion, she being in a bother about young Lockersley,” replied Carter. “Mr. Keston, he worships the ground Mrs. Merrion treads on.”

“But not the ground Mr. Lockersley treads on, I gather,” replied Macdonald.

Carter chuckled. “They like one another about as well as dog and cat,” he replied. “Mr. Lockersley, he’s devoted to madam too, or I’m much mistaken, and it’s made Mr. Keston as miserable as a sick monkey to see them together, but what’s that got to do with it, when all’s said and done. Mr. Keston, he didn’t want to kill the professor, nor Mr. Lockersley neither.”

Macdonald paused for a moment, and then continued by a question at a totally different angle.

“Who looks after the electric fittings here, fuses and so forth?” he inquired.

Carter stared, evidently surprised. “Well, I do any small jobs like fuses,” he replied. “Bonner, the caretaker who was in the house before it was let to madam, he’s no good at them jobs. I fitted up all the bulbs and hand lamps and that when we first came, and learnt about the fuse boxes and so on, just in case of need.”

“I see that there were lights in the porch and at the entrance gates,” said Macdonald, and Carter, looking more and more mystified, replied:

“Yes, sir. That’s right. Very well done it was. There were lights at all the awkward turns in the drive, and on the bridge as well, also at the entrance. I went round them all and removed the bulbs, so that there shouldn’t be no accidents with this blackout business. If anyone’s made any complaints, there’s been a mistake somewhere.”

“No. There haven’t been any complaints,” replied Macdonald. “I may need to fix up a light in the cave. If I connect a flex with the fitting in the entrance arch that will do it. I wondered if you’d removed the fuses.”

“No, I haven’t, though it wouldn’t have been a bad idea, now you mention it,” rejoined Carter. “This bloody blackout, if you’ll pardon me, is just about a nightmare. Always worrying about it, I am. Brady’s a sensible, careful sort of chap and does his best, but the professor’s that absent-minded, and Mr. Keston, too, they’d never remember to see their curtains

was shipshape unless someone looked after them. Many's the time I've been outside at night when I ought to've been in me bed, just to make sure the place wasn't showing lights enough to attract every Jerry who came over. It was the professor and Mr. Keston who were careless. They'd both go wandering around at night, and leave windows and doors open with the curtains flapping in the wind."

"So Mr. Keston was in the habit of wandering outside at night, was he?"

"Bless you, yes, sir! I believe he's a bad sleeper, and when he can't sleep he goes prowling about like a cat. He's a queer chap, but no vice in him, if you take me. Harmless as our Dinah." Dinah was an outsize in marmalade-colored cats, and was at the moment sitting beside Macdonald, regarding him with a benign stare.

Macdonald had been studying Carter, sizing him up. He liked the look of the man's stout, healthy face and the straightforward stare of his blue eyes. He was a clean, neat looking fellow, and the condition of the house and the kitchen was a credit to himself and his wife. Macdonald realized that Carter, for all his weight, must do as much work as three average housemaids in the great house at Valehead. Studying him, Macdonald said:

"Were you ever a sailor, Carter?"

The other looked surprised. "Why, yes, sir, I was as a young 'un. What made you ask?"

"I noticed you coming downstairs sideways, as a sailor does, and then you're a handy fellow. They say sailors make good housewives. Do you like a shore job better than being at sea?"

"I do now, sir. Not so young as I was. I like a bit of 'ome comfort."

Brady was Macdonald's next concern, and the C.I.D. man derived a good deal of amusement from the small Irishman. Brady and his wife had been with Professor Crewdon for twelve years, and both lamented bitterly concerning his death. As was only to be expected, the pair had been discussing the matter of the professor's death ever since Superintendent Turner had begun his inquiries. They made no bones of the fact that they had discussed every individual known to them in the light of a possible murderer, and were perfectly willing to pass on their opinions. Mrs. Merrion was held in high esteem by both of them, and they dismissed her

solemnly as a person above suspicion. Mrs. Stamford, however, they regarded in quite a different light. Her superior manner and inconsiderate ways had incensed Brady considerably.

“It’s only true to say, sir, that things have been different ever since she came into this house,” affirmed Brady. “Everything was as peaceful and happy as could be before she came, and she changed it all.”

“Come, come, that’s a bit sweeping,” said Macdonald. “Mrs. Stamford couldn’t have affected the weather, you know.”

“That I don’t know,” said Mrs. Brady, “and neither do you, begging your pardon. Some folks brings trouble and some brings rain. Why not mist? But this much you’ll admit. Mrs. Stamford comes here and everything’s upset. Mr. Rhodian, he goes away—a telephone call from London, maybe, but there might have been other reasons. The professor, God rest his kind soul, he comes hurrying back here, him that never did anything in a hurry—and is it too much to believe that he wouldn’t leave Mrs. Merrion alone in this place with that sister of hers?”

Brady put his spoke in here. “Now see here, sir. My missis, she’s going too far, that I’ll own, but you asked us to be open with you, and that’s what we’re trying to be. We wouldn’t name our thoughts to anyone else, but you’re a London detective—and you’re a gentleman, if you’ll pardon the liberty of my saying it—and we’re telling you just what is in our minds, same as we worried it out to ourselves. You ask us if we noticed anything out of the ordinary and we’re telling you. Since Mrs. Stamford came, things haven’t been the same.”

“I don’t want to discourage you from telling me anything which may be helpful,” replied Macdonald, “and I’ll respect your confidence over any ideas you may have, but it doesn’t help anyone to get an idea into their heads when there is no evidence to support it. Now, Brady. Did the professor ever talk to you about the cave?”

“No, sir. Not to say talk. I told him it wasn’t seemly for him to sleep there, and he’d likely catch his death of cold and get pneumonia, to say nothing of tramps and hooligans disturbing him, and Holy Mary knows what ghosts haunt the place, but he only laughed. ‘Brady,’ he says, ‘I’ve never seen a ghost yet. If there’s a ghost in yonder cave I’ll go more than halfway to meet it.’ He was a fearless man, the master. Nothing ever rattled him. Even the blitz in London—it only annoyed him because the noise

interfered with his work. He'd tell me and Mrs. Brady to go and sleep in the shelter, but for himself, he'd never go into a shelter. He said, 'What will be, will be.' Faith, and he was right, but I'd like to get my hands on to the man or woman who caused his death."

"Did you ever talk to anyone in the village about the professor liking to sleep in the cave, Brady?"

"Sure, and I did not," returned the little man indignantly. "I don't talk about my master—and as for the village, it's three miles away if it's a step. I haven't been there once the whole time we've been here, nor me wife neither."

Of the events of Wednesday night, Brady had little to say, and what he said corroborated what Carter had said. He had sat up with Carter until midnight, and had then gone to lie down. At half past two he had gone into "Carter's kitchen" again, and found that Lockersley had returned. At four o'clock he had heard Keston come in and had gone to speak to him and tell him that Lockersley was back.

"What did he say?" inquired Macdonald.

"He said, 'Damn and blast him. I'm tired. Does the professor know he's back?' I told him the professor was out, and he said, 'Oh, the morning'll be soon enough.' He tumbled onto his bed just as he was, as soon as he'd taken his boots off, and I left him to sleep. He was up at eight the next morning, though, because I saw him go off, and that was when he found the dear old gentleman, may the saints rest his soul."

It was after talking to the Bradys that Macdonald saw Eve Merrion again. She was standing by the front door talking to Keston. To Macdonald's mind, Keston's adoration of her showed plainly enough in his face and bearing when he was with Eve Merrion, as it did in the irritated glance he turned on the chief inspector. Mrs. Merrion, however, turned to the latter eagerly.

"I expect you're used to people asking the same futile questions, Chief Inspector, but all the time you are here I am wondering and wondering. . . . I can't even get on with my beloved rose garden."

"I'm so sorry." Macdonald's sympathy sounded quite spontaneous, which it was, for he had a knack of putting himself into another person's

place, though even as he spoke he realized that he was in danger of ruling Mrs. Merrion out from his list of suspects automatically. Rather sardonically, at the back of his mind he realized that it was the sheer kindness and gentleness of the woman who spoke to him which influenced him, probably as it appealed to the doting Keston.

"I'm afraid you may have to go on wondering for some time, Mrs. Merrion, just as I am doing myself. I admit that I haven't found a single indication to enlighten me as to the causes of things here. The next thing I want to do is to go through the professor's papers."

"Of course. I'll show you his rooms. Also, I have some papers which the bank manager has sent. I was keeping them for Mr. Layton, Father's solicitor, but I expect it's right for me to show them to you, isn't it? I knew very little about my father's affairs."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Merrion." Roland Keston's nervous voice intervened here. "Would it not be wiser to wait until Mr. Layton comes before the professor's private papers are inspected?"

"Why?" inquired Eve Merrion. "The chief inspector is here to investigate everything concerning Father's death. All I want to do is to help him get at every possible fact. It's not as though there were anything we wanted to hide, and even if there is, it wouldn't be much use trying to hide it. No. I say let the chief inspector see everything."

"Quite honestly, I think that that is your wisest course, Mrs. Merrion, as it is your easiest," replied Macdonald. "I shall be very glad to see your father's solicitor tomorrow, and if I go through the professor's papers tonight, it will save time when Mr. Layton does arrive."

"Of course," replied Eve. "Mr. Keston will take you to Father's room and tell you where things are kept. Nothing is locked up, my father did not believe in locking things up."

Macdonald went with Keston, the latter leading with no attempt to conceal his repugnance for his errand, to the long west wing of the house where the professor had had his quarters. These consisted of two fine big rooms on the ground floor, one used as the professor's study, one as a dining room; a room fitted up as a kitchen, and the Bradys' bedroom were at the back of the house, also on the ground floor, and a small stairway led upward to the bedrooms on the first floor occupied by the professor and Roland Keston. The rooms were conveniently grouped, having their own

entrance from the garden, and Macdonald observed to Keston that it must have been an ideal environment for a scholar to work in, utterly peaceful and cut off from any interruptions or sounds from the world outside.

Keston stood fiddling with his glasses, his thin face morose and unhappy.

“Possibly,” he replied. “Professor Crewdon was very pleased with the accommodation. I can only say that I shall never cease to regret that Mrs. Merrion came here, beautiful though it is—” He broke off abruptly and then continued in his usual precise way: “This was the professor’s study. His business papers are in the roll-top desk. It is unlocked. The writing table by the window holds his literary work—manuscript, notebooks and letters pertaining to his work. Since it is Mrs. Merrion’s wish, I will leave you here to make any investigations you think desirable.”

“One moment,” said Macdonald. “Will you tell me if your work as the professor’s secretary involved any dealings with his personal correspondence and business affairs, or was it concerned only with his literary work and research?”

“The professor answered his own personal letters, though he occasionally asked me to draft replies, embodying his own suggestions, letters from fellow scholars, requests for information and so forth. As to business, I was entrusted with the routine work of paying current expenses—rent, rates, household bills and the like, also of checking passbooks, royalty accounts and such like. The professor was a methodical business man; you will find an account of his sources of income and so forth among his papers in the desk. Everything is quite orderly, simple and straightforward. Mr. Layton has the professor’s will.”

While he listened to the dry, precise voice Macdonald tried to assess the undercurrent of rancor which sounded through Keston’s pedantic utterance. Why, Macdonald wondered, should a reasonable man like Keston thus resent the obvious routine necessities of a police investigation? The chief inspector put in another inquiry:

“To the best of your knowledge, has there been any unusual financial transaction on Professor Crewdon’s part recently? In an inquiry such as this one, the investigator has to search for any motive, however improbable it may appear.”

Keston flushed, as though he resented the question as a personal affront.

“I do not know exactly what you would designate as an unusual financial transaction,” he replied dryly. “There was certainly nothing spectacular in any of the professor’s dealings with his stockbrokers. You will find that all his investments are sound, unspeculative affairs.” Again he fiddled with his glasses, paused as though to consider, and then added, “Shortly after the outbreak of war the professor did carry through an unusual transaction—unusual for one of his conservative habits in money matters, that is to say. He sold a considerable block of industrial shares and invested the proceeds in a very different manner. He bought diamonds, being of the opinion that it might be advantageous, in an emergency, to have some portable valuables which would not deteriorate in value, as currency might.”

In Macdonald’s mind ran the question, “Are you a bigger fool than you look, or do you look a bigger fool than you are?” as he studied Keston’s nervous, melancholy face. Aloud the chief inspector said:

“That is a very interesting fact, Mr. Keston. Can you tell me where the diamonds are?”

“I have no idea,” replied Keston. “I know nothing of jewels, and this matter did not interest me. I had forgotten about it until you made your query concerning unusual financial transactions. I do not even know if the professor repented his action, and later realized on these gems and reinvested the proceeds in War Savings. I remember being surprised when he told me of his action in buying the diamonds. It seemed out of character for one of the professor’s philosophic mind. He was thinking of his children, I believe, and his grandchildren, and how he could best be of service to them in a time of national upheaval, when currency notes might prove valueless. He was certainly not thinking of himself or his own safety.”

“Have you any idea of the value of the diamonds?”

“None at all. You will doubtless find all the data relevant to their purchase among the papers in the desk.”

“But not the diamonds themselves, I take it?”

“I have no idea at all,” replied Keston. “I have never so much as speculated on the place where they are kept. As I told you, I had actually forgotten all about the matter. It was in no respect my business. The professor only mentioned the diamonds to me one day when we had been

discussing the possibilities of a world collapse of the economic system. I have never seen the jewels in question, and I have no idea where they were kept.”

“It did not occur to you that such negotiable valuables might be a motive for murder?”

Again Keston stared in his surprised, melancholy fashion.

“Indeed, no. Now you suggest it, I can only reply that such a hypothesis seems groundless. To steal—yes, that is a commonplace to certain types of mind, but to murder adds to the danger of the criminal without adding to the value of the things stolen.”

“Quite—but murder has been done on many occasions in order to safeguard the thief from discovery. If, for instance, the professor told a certain person—and no one else—of the existence of the diamonds and their hiding place, that person could not steal the jewels and hope to escape suspicion unless the professor was silenced for all time.”

A dark flush crept up over Keston’s thin face.

“I follow your reasoning,” he said. “It might be . . . no, any supposition is too fantastic. I can make no helpful suggestion at all. In any case, this conversation is foolishly speculative. You have no grounds for assuming theft. I can only suggest that you follow out Mrs. Merrion’s wishes, and examine the professor’s papers in detail.”

“Yes. That seems indicated,” agreed Macdonald. “I may need your assistance later, to answer any further questions which may arise, so I should be glad if you would stay in the house.”

“I had no intention of doing otherwise while you remain here,” replied Keston with dignity, and Macdonald smiled to himself over that ambiguous answer as the secretary walked out of the room, his shoulders hunched up, his head down.

Roland Keston had been perfectly correct in saying that Professor Crewdon’s business affairs were straight-forward, and his papers in order. An hour’s work over the methodically kept books and papers in the roll-top desk put Macdonald in possession of all the salient facts regarding the dead man’s financial affairs. An income of five hundred pounds a year from investments, plus varying sums from his books, articles and lectures—

totaling just over one thousand pounds of income in the past year—were clearly stated in a book kept for that purpose, which also included a list of share securities. The sale of twelve hundred pounds' worth of stock, and the paying out of twelve hundred fifty pounds to a firm of diamond dealers in Hatton Garden in the year 1939 were also entered. A copy of the professor's will, his passbook file and a statement from his bank covering his current account for the past three months was also found. The will left all deceased's invested securities to his daughter Emmeline, who was to enjoy the income therefrom during her life, the capital to be divided in equal shares between her children on her death. To his daughter Eve the professor left any sums accruing from royalties, together with his books, manuscripts and papers. To Roland Keston was willed one thousand pounds in War Savings and National Bonds together with the professor's furniture, and to Brady and his wife the sum of two hundred pounds. A short, neat will, but it contained no mention of the diamonds, having been drafted in 1935, and no codicil having been added.

Macdonald went carefully through all the drawers of the desk, noting the exquisite neatness with which Keston had kept his books and papers relating to current expenditure, but found nothing save the account books, papers, bills and receipts of everyday affairs.

The kneehole table by the window contained quantities of manuscript, typescript, notes, letters and a few books. A large cabinet fitted with drawers contained various specimens of interest to the anthropologist and archeologist, and there was a large number of books on the built-in shelves. Everything was orderly, scholarly and peaceful—a room in which a scholar and philosopher had evidently delighted, but also a room which contained nothing to assist a detective. That the professor had been murdered Macdonald was convinced, but his study threw no light on the matter unless the absence of the diamonds proved to be germane to the case.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Macdonald left the professor's study and went back to the entrance hall, where he found Eve Merrion talking to a tall, dark young man.

Mrs. Merrion came toward Macdonald at once.

"I have been wondering if you would dine with us, Chief Inspector. You have been working hard for such a long time."

Macdonald smiled down at her. "That is very kind of you, Mrs. Merrion. A lot of people seem to think that policemen are superhuman and live without meals. Thank you very much for the kind thought but I have to go and see Inspector Turner in the village, and I can get supper at the inn."

"As you will, of course, whichever is more convenient to you, but I should have been glad, quite honestly, if you could have stayed, and we could have talked about things again. You have been so considerate to us, and I'm honestly grateful."

"I think it would probably be more profitable if we discussed matters later, when I have finished the preliminary spade work," said Macdonald, "but there are a few additional questions I should like to ask, if you can spare a minute."

"Of course. I'll come outside with you. I'll just tell Mr. Rhodian to go along upstairs. He has come to collect his suitcase which he left here."

"I see. He was staying with you last week, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He wanted to meet my father."

Eve turned toward the young man, raising her voice slightly, and Bruce Rhodian came forward and she said:

"The chief inspector wants to talk to me for a minute. Do you mind going up, you know the way."

"Of course. Don't bother about me, Mrs. Merrion."

Macdonald stepped forward also. "Mr. Rhodian, I wish you would spare me a minute or two a little later. I understand that you were in the Hermit's Cave with Mr. Keston and Mr. Lockersley one evening, and I wanted to ask you about a small incident which occurred there."

"Ask anything you like, though I don't remember anything worth calling an incident." The bright, dark eyes regarded Macdonald with a curiosity to which he was not unaccustomed. Many people looked on a C.I.D. man with just that lively interest. "In about fifteen minutes, outside there?"

"Thanks very much," replied Macdonald, and turned back to Mrs. Merrion. They walked out through the open front doors onto the sunlit terrace, and when they were out of earshot of the house Macdonald asked:

“Did your father give you any reason for his change of plan in coming back here on Wednesday instead of on Thursday?”

“No. He said that London was rather hot and wearing, and that the thought of Valehead seemed very delectable. He had got very fond of the place. There was no reason for him to stay longer in London. He had given his lecture, and his old friend, Professor Evans, had had to leave London a day earlier than he expected. He was returning to the States, and had to go when he was told as people do these days.”

“I see. Now for the other point. Had your father mentioned to you that he had purchased some diamonds early in the war?”

“No. He never told me about it. My sister, Mrs. Stamford, mentioned it to me today. Father said something to her about it, rather jokingly, and she remembered about it and asked me if he’d ever said anything about diamonds to me. She wasn’t sure if he was in earnest when he spoke or whether it were a joke.”

“No, it wasn’t a joke. He invested a considerable sum in diamonds, as a sort of portable security. I wondered where he kept them.”

“At his bank, surely, where one always keeps such things,” replied Eve. “Poor darling! Fancy him buying diamonds! He could have had mine if he had wanted any. I hate them.” She turned to Macdonald in her impetuous way. “Oh, dear. . . . Is this another bother? I can’t imagine Father worrying about diamonds. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll find they are at his bank. He was very sensible about such things.”

“The bank manager will soon settle that point for us,” replied Macdonald. “I just wanted to make sure whether you and Mrs. Stamford knew anything about them. Now, if I may borrow Mr. Rhodian for a short time, I want him to come to the cave with me.”



7

A FEW minutes later Macdonald was walking down the drive with Bruce Rhodian. The latter was talkative, and chattered on as they made their way under the beech trees.

“I’m so darned sorry for Mrs. Merrion over all this,” he said. “So far as the old man was concerned, he had a very peaceful end, and I don’t think he’d have wished a better, but it seems uncommonly rough luck for Mrs. Merrion to have to face all this racket.” He looked at Macdonald in his lively, interrogating way. “I know it’s a cool nerve to express opinions when I don’t know all the facts, but it does seem so utterly improbable that anyone would have gone out of their way to murder the professor, and to do it in that particular way.”

Macdonald looked at Rhodian with a half-smile.

“Don’t be afraid of expressing your opinions,” he said. “I often get useful sidelights on a case when people give voice to ideas which may seem unhelpful on their face value. You speak about the method employed. The whole point about it, to my way of thinking, is that it might well have passed as accident. It still may, if I can’t get any conclusive evidence. Most methods of murder can’t be mistaken for accident.” He paused a moment and then added, “Put yourself in the murderer’s place; it’s a useful exercise. Can you suggest any method of achieving the end in view neater than the one employed?”

“Funny you should have asked that,” replied Rhodian equably. “It’s a question I’ve been asking myself. Put yourself in the murderer’s place and worry out a foolproof method. I suppose there isn’t one, but I should have thought that throwing him in the lake or engineering a fall of rock would have met the case.” He broke off.

“I sound pretty cold-blooded,” he added apologetically, “but you asked me to view the thing as a problem.”

“Quite right,” replied Macdonald. “That is obviously the detective’s method, as objective as a problem in algebra, or assessing margins of error by calculus. Now for your methods: You can’t throw a big, reasonably powerful man into a lake and expect him to drown quietly in order to oblige. You would have to hold him under, and things might not go the way you expected. Also, if you used violence you would leave marks, and those marks would militate against an accident theory. As for the fall of rock, so far as I can judge from appearances—and I have done a bit of rock-climbing and know treacherous rock when I see it—you could only cause a rock-fall in that cave by detonation, the use of explosives, and that method could hardly pass as accidental. Even though the murderer were optimistic enough to hope that the explosion were accepted as a stray bomb from a stray bomber, investigation would soon disprove that theory.”

They had arrived at the end of the drive, and Rhodian paused before turning toward the entrance to the cave.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, both times,” he admitted. “As a potential murderer I don’t seem to be a success. The fall of rock theory occurred to me because when I was in the cave, I had a horrible feeling that the roof was going to fall in on me and bury me, maybe the result of having worked in a rescue squad during the blitz, and dug out poor devils who had been buried. It gave me the jitters.”

He walked to the cave’s entrance, saying, “Beastly hole, isn’t it? I always loathe caves. What was it you wanted to know?”

“When you were in here with Mr. Keston and Mr. Lockersley, on the evening before you left, do you remember anything about a match being dropped on the ground?”

“Yes. Now you mention it, I do. Lockersley—no, Keston lighted a cigarette and threw the match down while it was still burning. It caught some leaves—I remember the little spiral of blue smoke—but Lockersley put his foot on it after a few seconds. Anyway, it was put out before we left the cave. No chance of it having flared up again, at least I don’t think so.”

“Did you notice anything in particular about the behavior of the smoke?”

“Not a thing. A few leaves smoldered, that was all. I hardly noticed it. I was pondering over Keston and Lockersley, and their attitude to one another.”

“What about it?”

“Oh, just a queer feeling that I had that they might fly at one another’s throats. I explained it away afterwards by putting it down to the cave. I don’t mean spooks, or supernatural influence, or anything bats of that kind, but just that the cave has a bad effect on me. I don’t like it—the beastly green light and the shut-in feeling—it makes me irritable as a cat, and I think Lockersley felt the same, although he wouldn’t own it.”

“I understand that Mr. Lockersley suggested that you should go with him to see the cave?”

“Yes. I’d said I wanted to see it, and he offered to do showman.”

“And Mr. Keston. Did he accompany you?”

“No. He must have followed us a little later. I was standing with my back to the entrance, and was suddenly conscious of someone behind me. It was Keston. He’d come in as quietly as a cat and was watching us.”

“He was watching you,” repeated Macdonald thoughtfully. “I don’t want to lead you as a witness, but could you enlarge on that remark?”

Rhodian rubbed his dark hair until it stood up in a rumpled mass, making him look more than ever boyish. Before he answered he lighted a cigarette and threw the match down on the ground, where the flame licked against some dead leaves, and a trail of blue smoke went up.

“Look—it was like that,” he said, and Macdonald nodded. The smoke from Rhodian’s cigarette joined the rising coil from the floor, and two blue spirals floated out of the entrance space. Macdonald, leaning back against the wall, lighted a cigarette himself. Rhodian stood by the entrance and looked outside.

“You were asking me what I meant by saying that Keston was watching us,” he said. “The funny thing is that I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if he were prowling about somewhere now. He’s a rum chap. I don’t want to give an unfair impression, but when he butted in when Lockersley and I were talking in here, I felt he was watching out on us, seeing that we didn’t interfere. I wondered afterwards if his anthropology had turned him a bit crackers. I know of one chap who performs some sacred rites with a totem

pole for deity, or something of the kind. Anyway, Keston gave me the feeling that he resented us being here, but again, that might be exaggeration.”

“You didn’t ask him why he’d followed you?”

“Lord, no. I was only a guest here. It’s more his cave than mine.”

While he was talking Rhodian had been standing half sideways to Macdonald, looking out at the sunlit lake. Macdonald had moved a step or two, and stood for perhaps half a minute with his back against the lancet slit of the window. It took him no longer than a few seconds to observe the difference made in the atmosphere of the cave when the current of air was blocked at one end. The smoke from his cigarette no longer drifted out toward the entrance: it went straight up and hung in a cloud by the roof. He moved away and crossed the cave and stood by Rhodian. The latter spoke again impetuously.

“Look here, it’s a hell of a business suspecting people. The more I think of it, the more impossible it seems that murder is the answer to this business. No one *knew* the old man was coming to sleep here that night. It was just chance that he did. Then there’s this to it. The professor came along here late in the evening, so Mrs. Merrion says—well after eleven o’clock, anyway.”

“Did Mrs. Merrion say that she knew when her father left the house?”

“No. Of course not. She didn’t know, but they were talking till about eleven in the drawing room, so it must have been close on midnight before he left the house. It would have been dark under these trees. How could anyone have been certain that the person who came down the drive was the professor? It would have been too dark to see him.”

“No, I don’t think it would,” replied Macdonald. “With the double hour of summertime, plus the moon, I think there would have been enough light to recognize the professor by—his white hair would have made that easier, as well as his height. However, it’s all very much surmise at this stage. Now you will be wanting to get back to dinner, and I have various jobs to do, so I’ll leave you now, with many thanks for answering all my questions.”

“Damn it, he *is* there, snooping around,” put in Rhodian suddenly, and Macdonald looked over the other’s shoulder toward the narrow end of the

lake, where a bridge crossed the water. Keston stood there in the golden sunlight, gazing in the direction of the house, straight up the valley.

“Snooping doesn’t seem a fair word to use,” replied Macdonald mildly. “He’s probably only taking a little exercise to get an appetite for dinner, now that I am safely out of the house. Don’t let suspicion upset your judgment.”

Rhodian grinned, his bright dark eyes twinkling.

“I’m being a dime fool,” he said. “It’s this cave. I told you it makes me unreasonable. Maybe it affects other people that way, too.”

He nodded to Macdonald and swung off down the drive, moving with a swift, springy step, youthful and buoyant.

Macdonald had told Reeves to park his car just outside the drive, Reeves himself having been given instructions to wander about and enjoy himself while he had the chance, and also to observe what he could and make himself familiar with the lie of the land. Macdonald got in the car and started driving leisurely toward the village, reflecting for about the twentieth time that day that this rich valley was one of the loveliest localities he had ever seen. Heron and moorhens played lazily above the river; the water meadows were intensely green, jeweled with flowers, and the fine Devon cattle stood placidly in their rich pastures. A rich and green and pleasant land, peaceful with the peace of solitude and sunshine and plenteousness—a strange setting for a murder. The roadway was so narrow that bracken brushed the sides of the car, and wild roses tossed delicate petals over it. Macdonald, always a considerate driver, pulled up when he saw a pedestrian coming toward him, before he realized that it was David Lockersley. The latter stopped as he made his way between the car and the hedge.

“Hallo. All over bar the shouting?”

“Hardly. I’ve just been noticing things,” replied Macdonald, “but there’s a lot more that I want to notice. Do you feel disposed to do a bit of cooperation?”

“Provided I’m not asked to do anything outrageously lowdown, yes,” replied Lockersley, and Macdonald answered:

“I don’t think it’s anything likely to hurt your sensitive conscience, though it may rattle your nerves, if they’re given to rattling, as I suspect they are.”

Lockersley grinned, a slow, rather twisted grin which lightened his sullen face.

“My nerves are shockproof. What about it?”

“I want to find out what sort of visibility there is in the drive about midnight, just outside the Hermit’s Cave. It would be helpful if you would impersonate the professor, walking into the cave. You’re not much short of his height, and you’re fair-headed, about the nearest approach to his appearance around here.”

“Good Lord!” Lockersley stared. “I wish I knew what was in your mind. I’m not sure that I like this idea.”

“If you don’t, you can say no, thank you. There’s no compulsion to assist.”

“Oh, I’ll do it, all right. I only wondered. . . . Where do you want me to meet you?”

“I want you, if you will, to set out from the house at eleven-thirty and walk quietly down the drive. Go into the cave and sit down or lie down. I want you to listen, and tell me if you hear or notice anything. Fifteen minutes after you have gone in there, I shall come and thank you for your kind assistance, and you may then go home to bed.”

“Hell! What a part to play! I am the victim, and you?”

“The murderer, obviously, only I shall take care that you come to no harm.”

“Thanks for the assurance. I wonder . . . if I had done the old man in, should I have the nerve to do just what you ask, knowing you were there, watching for me to give myself away? In your experience, do most murderers break down when they’re faced with a recapitulation of their crime?”

“Murderers can’t be classed in a group. They vary. Some break down when they realize they have been bowled out, others don’t. One can’t generalize.”

“As a matter of general information, tell me this. If you really suspected me of this crime, would you be justified in asking me to do what you have just detailed?”

“Cooperate in a visibility experiment? I think so. I’m not asking you to give evidence against yourself. I’m not trying to trap you. I simply want to know if it’s possible to recognize you as you go into the cave shortly before midnight, and you to tell me what you notice while you are inside. Any member of the public would do for the part. It only happens that you are particularly suitable on account of your height and coloring.” Macdonald paused and then asked quite casually, “By the way, have you ever slept in the Hermit’s Cave?”

Lockersley flushed. “No. Not slept there. Sat in there and watched the dawn, and I tell you it was worth seeing.”

“I can well believe it. Well, will you do what I have asked you?”

“Yes. I will leave the house at eleven-thirty and walk to the cave, go inside and lie down and wait fifteen minutes.”

“Good. Now, in addition, will you tax your memory and try to write down verbatim all that was said when Mr. Rhodian first asked to see the cave, and the conversation between you, him and Mr. Keston when you actually visited the place.”

Again Lockersley smiled. “I like that part better. I have a good memory. Incidentally, do you ask the others for their version, too?”

“Obviously.”

“And if the accounts don’t tally?”

“I observe, as I have often observed before, that very few people have accurate verbal memories, though many claim to have.”

“You know, I think the detective method is more interesting than I had imagined,” said Lockersley. “I feel a poor mutt. I have been kicking myself for days trying to think of something I could do in the investigating line, and I never thought of any of the things you suggest, though they’re quite simple.”

“A good thing you didn’t. You might have got into a considerable mess, but I think you’ve had an idea or two, all the same. Thanks very much for being so willing to help.”

This time Lockersley laughed outright.

“If ever you do arrest me, I shall be intrigued to observe the courtesy with which the handcuffs are applied. I’m late for dinner, which will annoy Mrs. Stamford, so I’d better foot it. Eleven-thirty is zero hour.”

“Right. I’ll run you back if you like.”

“Don’t bother. You’d have to reverse for half a mile. Besides, I like annoying Mrs. Stamford.”

With a nod, Lockersley squeezed past the car and went on his way toward Valehead, and Macdonald drove peacefully on through the radiant evening light.

“Eve, I’m sure it was because of those diamonds, and Keston knows something about it.”

Emmeline Stamford leaned toward her sister as they sat in the drawing room before dinner, and Eve Merrion sighed.

“How long, oh Lord, how long . . .” she asked herself wearily. Eve was tired. Tired of the strain of question and answer, tired of keeping up a level of calm imperturbability when she felt herself getting near to screaming point, and most tired of all of her sister’s nervous voice and persistent harping on the one unhappy theme.

“Emma dear, it’s no use saying things like that, and no use guessing. The diamonds are probably put away quite safely somewhere, and Keston has never known anything about them. In any case, I won’t have you making suggestions about him. I know him much better than you do, and Father knew him even better, and said that he would trust him anywhere, with anything. For heaven’s sake let us leave the subject alone. The whole inquiry is right out of our hands, and we can’t do anything. Let us try to talk and think about something else. I know it’s all ghastly, but dwelling on it only makes it ghastlier.”

Emmeline Stamford got up and moved restlessly about the room. “Eve, can’t we get away? Go back to London or something. This place gives me the horrors.”

“I can’t go. You know that. I suppose you could. Ask the chief inspector. He’s a most considerate person.”

“That man? He terrifies me. Besides, how could I go away and leave you to be—oh, what’s that?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Stamford. Did I startle you?” Bruce Rhodian had just opened the door, and he continued, “I was going to ask Mrs. Merrion to come for a stroll and see her hydrangeas in the evening light. They look next door to a miracle.”

“I should love to come,” said Eve. “The house seems oppressive these light evenings. I always hate coming in.”

“Eve, don’t go out—not near that awful lake.”

Emmeline’s nervous voice nearly exasperated her sister.

“Emma, don’t be so silly! The lake’s perfectly lovely. You’d better go to bed early, my dear. You’re tired out. Bed and a couple of aspirins is what you want. Go up quite early, and I’ll bring you a hot drink to settle you after you’ve had your bath.”

She turned to Rhodian, saying, “Come and let me see the hydrangeas. I know they look lovely in the evening, bluer than blue can be.”

They went out of the entrance hall onto the terrace, and Rhodian said:

“I’m sorry your sister’s reacting badly to all this.”

“It is pretty awful, you know,” replied Eve, “and Emma won’t leave it alone. She keeps on harping away, and her nerves are all jangled, like fiddle strings. Funnily enough I feel better since the chief inspector came. He’s such a sensible, kindly creature, and he has the knack of seeing one’s point of view. I always thought a Scotland Yard man would be rather harsh and peremptory, not exactly bullying, but a bit like a glorified edition of a traffic cop lecturing one after one’s had a collision. Sorry to sound childish, but it’s rather a relief to talk foolishly after trying to be sensible and helpful all day.”

“Sure. I sympathize with you more than I can say, Mrs. Merrion. You’re having a real rough deal. I know it’s right that there should be an expert investigation, but the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that the cops are wrong in suspecting foul play. I believe that they’ll come to the conclusion that the professor’s death was an accident.”

“I believe that, too, but I’m afraid it may be wishful thinking,” said Eve. “The crux of the problem is so simple when all is said and done. If it could only be shown how the charcoal was lighted in the brazier, everything

might be cleared up. Father might so easily have lighted a fire to warm the place, without ever telling us that he was in the habit of doing so. The point is, how did he get the charcoal to burn, without bellows, and without making a wood fire to give it a start? Methyated spirit is ruled out because there was no bottle and no container.”

“Did he ever have any Meta fuel? That would serve the same purpose as Methy, and rules out the container difficulty.”

“Why, that *is* an idea!” said Eve. “I know he had a Meta stove, because I gave him one. He often made tea or coffee when he was working at night, and after he’d fused two electric kettles because he’d forgotten all about them, I gave him the Meta outfit. If he forgot that, the fuel just burned out and there was no harm done. It’s worth suggesting it, anyway. Oh, look, isn’t it lovely?”

As they talked they had reached the lake at the head of the valley. The hydrangeas were in full flower now, and their color was amazing against the clear water. The intense cobalt blue, cool mauve and occasional verdigris-green of the massed flowers was an unforgettable sight. Behind them the gray-green of eucalyptus trees and the strange waving white petals of the Chinese “ghost trees” made a background perfect as a foil to the blue blossoms.

“I could cry about it all!” burst out Eve despondently. “This is about the loveliest place in the world, and I wanted so much to see the hydrangeas in flower, and now I shall always think of them in connection with this turmoil of distress and fear and suspicion.”

Rhodian caught her arm in his firm grasp.

“Don’t think that, Mrs. Merrion. There’s hardly a place in the world where death hasn’t happened. Many people must have died in Valehead House, but that doesn’t spoil it for you. I expect the original hermit died in his cave down yonder, but life goes on.”

He was standing close beside Eve as he spoke, and she stood still, rather glad of the comforting clasp of his hand. Suddenly another voice broke the silence.

“Mrs. Merrion, Mrs. Merrion. Be careful. You might slip.”

Eve turned in astonishment as Keston came hurrying down the wooded slope behind her.

“What *do* you mean?” Eve’s voice sounded indignant for once. “I’m just trying to enjoy the hydrangeas. I’ve been here a hundred times before, and you talk about slipping as though I were in the habit of tumbling into the lake and behaving Ophelia-wise.”

“I’m sorry. I beg your pardon. I thought. . . . No matter.” Keston sounded unhappy as he mumbled his apologies and then broke off abruptly.

“I beg your pardon,” he repeated. “I was foolish to be apprehensive.” He turned away and regained the path behind them, and Rhodian said softly:

“The poor chap’s completely crackers. Things have been too much for him, and he’s all in a fiddle of nerves.”

He was still standing with his hand on Eve’s arm, and she moved a little away from him as she said:

“Everyone is in a fiddle of nerves here. It’s quite refreshing to have you to talk to, because you are unaffected by it all. Emma will be making up her mind I’m drowned in the lake if I don’t go back. Oh, dear, how wearisome it all is.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Rhodian quietly. “I’d do anything I could to help.”

“I know you would. Now for a few minutes let’s talk about something quite different. What about your own plans? Is anything settled yet?”

“Yes. I’m going to the States. I can get into the Flying Corps there, and I shall be perfectly fit in a month’s time. I’m an American citizen, you know, and it’s more logical to be with my own folk. One day, when all this pother is over and Hitler’s got what’s coming to him, I’ll fly the Atlantic and come and see you here.”

“Yes, do. How lovely to think there may be an afterwards, when flying will be used as a blessing and not as a curse to mankind. Perhaps you’ll even invite me to fly back with you. I should adore a long flight, chasing the days and nights.”

He laughed. “That’s a date, then; I’ll fly over and fetch you—afterwards—and we’ll chase the sunset. Why, you’re shivering. Not cold, surely?”

“No. Not cold. Ghosts. I’m terrified of planning ‘afterwards.’ One never knows.”

“No,” he agreed soberly. “One never knows. One plans and plays one’s hand, and takes the consequences. But I shall never forget those hydrangeas this evening.”

“I don’t think I shall, either,” she replied.

AT eleven o'clock that same evening Macdonald was sitting with his back to the Valehead boundary wall, about fifty yards from the entrance to the cave. He was concealed from view by some low-growing rhododendron bushes, but he had a clear view of the drive and the arched entrance to the cave. The radiance of the late sunset had passed, and color was gradually leaving the world. The heavy-foliaged beech trees cast their dimness over the drive; the vivid green seemed to fade from the branches, leaving them dark and shadowy and colorless. The air was very still, and gradually cooling, and all the pent-up sweetness of the day seemed to be saturating the air, the scent of innumerable flowers heavy and fragrant, as though it moved in wafts on the cooling air. Slowly, imperceptibly, all color faded out. It was still curiously light, even under the trees, but the light had a quality quite different from that of day. Flowers and leaves faded to a monotone of grayness; only the white flowers, such as the stellaria with its star-like shape, and the moon daisies, shone as though with some inward light.

Macdonald leaned back against the wall and waited as the world grew grayer and the distance faded. Was it thus, he wondered, that a murderer had waited a week ago? Had someone crouched in the bushes, not far from where he himself sat, and waited until the kindly old man came to his strange sleeping place? It was possible, on the other hand, that the professor's murderer had not waited for him, but had followed him from the house, and seen him enter the cave. Macdonald pondered over the two possibilities. He believed that he had guessed how the charcoal was ignited, and only a minimum of preparation would have been necessary, but even so, the murderer would have had to spend some few minutes over the mechanics of the job, and Macdonald was disposed to believe that this part

of the work would not have been carried out in full daylight, or at some hour of the evening when the estate men might pass along the drive. Though the mist had been thick on the moor, it had been almost clear in the valley, so no cover could have been gained therefrom.

From half past eleven onward Macdonald listened intently. He had very good ears, and he heard many sounds unconnected with his present job. Once a green grass snake, half a yard long, writhed past him, moving with incredible swiftness and grace. A baby rabbit sat a few feet away and watched the C.I.D. man with bright, unfrightened eyes. An owl hooted close by, and the rabbit ran to earth.

For all that he listened intently, Macdonald did not hear Lockersley's footsteps until the latter was within twenty yards of him; the young man's rubber-soled shoes made no sound, and he walked quietly and evenly. The twilight had almost faded, but even in the dusk of the drive Lockersley's fair head and pale face were quite visible to Macdonald; he was wearing a white collar, and a triangle of white shirt showed between his dark jacket and his chin. There was no moon yet, as there had been on the night the professor was killed, yet Macdonald was sure that, sitting where he was, he could have recognized the professor in that dim light. There was a portrait of the old man in Mrs. Merrion's dining room, and the painter had emphasized the mane of white hair brushed back from the wide brow. That white head would have been unmistakable even in the filtered twilight of the shaded drive.

Lockersley did exactly what he had been asked to do: without hesitation he walked quietly into the black gloom of the cave's entrance and disappeared. Macdonald stayed where he was. He had put Reeves in charge of further proceedings, and he himself was not listening to what went on in the cave. He had become aware of another sound which interested him a great deal—the sound of other halting footsteps farther back along the drive. The newcomer did not walk as Lockersley had walked, easily and smoothly. The former was a more clumsy walker, who might have been confused by the semi-darkness; he stubbed his toe once or twice on the uneven surface, and paused after each slight sound.

The darkness was triumphing over the twilight with every moment that passed. By the time the newcomer had reached the spot where Macdonald had recognized Lockersley, the detective was only able to see the pale blur

of a face above a coat fastened up to the chin. Then a chance turn of the head caught a reflection from the lake, and a pair of glasses gleamed for a second in telltale fashion. Keston was the only person who wore glasses in the Valehead household.

A thrush, startled by the newcomer, flew across the drive, shrilling its alarm call, and Macdonald heard the quick gasp of alarm from the yet more startled pedestrian.

Balancing himself on his toes, ready to spring forward to intervene should it be necessary, Macdonald wondered what Lockersley was thinking there in the cave. If his hearing were normally acute, he must have heard the other man's approach. By the time Keston—if it were he—had reached the mouth of the cave, Macdonald thought it was time to leave his own hiding place. Quietly he separated the branches and stepped out onto the open drive, just as Keston entered the cave. The C.I.D. man crept up behind him, but still Lockersley gave no sign of life. A second later even Macdonald felt his skin prickle as something like a stifled scream shrilled in the darkness.

Macdonald's flashlight cut a white swathe across the darkness of the cave. Lockersley was lying on the hermit's bed, and Keston, who had cried out, was standing just beside him, swaying as he stood.

Lockersley's voice, indignant but quite unafraid, broke out:

"What the ruddy hell do you imagine you're all doing, and have I finished my 'performance by request,' or haven't I? I've never felt such a —"

Keston's voice broke in, shrill with nervous tension.

"It is Lockersley! I knew! I knew all the time."

He turned around and recognized Macdonald in the reflected beam of light.

"He's there! I've found him! Arrest him, I tell you. Search him!"

"Shut up, you ruddy fool. There's something indecent about the way you bleat," said Lockersley indignantly.

"Search him! Search him!" persisted Keston, his nervous falsetto quivering.

Macdonald's quiet voice made itself heard.

“Pull yourself together, Mr. Keston. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but Mr. Lockersley came here at my specific request. He came into the cave because I asked him to come.”

“He came here before. I tell you I know it!” insisted Keston. “It is he who is guilty, infamous scoundrel that he is.”

“Oh, dry up. You make me sick,” interpolated Lockersley.

“I suggest that you go back to the house, Mr. Keston,” said Macdonald, “unless you would like to volunteer a statement as to what you were doing here.”

“I followed him,” said Keston, pointing to Lockersley. “I knew that he would give himself away at last.”

“Let’s get out of this place, anyway,” said Lockersley. “It’s too stuffy with all of us in it, and I, for one, don’t like wrangling over the old man’s deathbed.”

He stood up and pushed his way past Keston to the cave’s entrance. The latter, his voice shaking with a curious nervous tremor, retorted:

“You may well feel guilty here, at the scene of your crime—”

“What the devil is all the to-do about, Keston? I saw a light flickering across that arch, and it gave me the jitters. I thought it was spooks.”

The last voice which spoke came from outside the cave, and Macdonald recognized it as Rhodian’s. The C.I.D. man came out into the shadowy drive and spoke clearly:

“I didn’t anticipate a party when I made arrangements to meet Mr. Lockersley here this evening. I suggest that you others go back to the house. If you have any evidence to give, Mr. Keston, you will have ample opportunity to give it tomorrow.”

“Sorry if I butted in at someone else’s party,” said Rhodian, “but it’s only human nature to be inquisitive. That light in the cave looked pretty ghostly.”

“And where were you when you saw the light?” inquired Macdonald.

“Just across the lake there, with Carter. He and I went for a stroll. I think he was a bit inquisitive, too, having seen first Lockersley and then Keston wander off into the gloaming. The light in the cave was too much for Carter’s nerves, though. He did a bolt back home, saying his prayers

backwards. Come on, Keston. We may as well remove ourselves as requested. It's only too plain we're not wanted here."

"Very well. I will go, since I am asked to go," replied Keston. "You have the delinquent there, Inspector. See to it that he does not escape you."

He turned away, and Rhodian vanished into the shadows beside him. Rhodian's voice floated back to them in the darkness, "I say, I should be careful before you go slinging things at other people like that, Keston. Doesn't seem very wise to me."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Lockersley. "Were all these dramatic effects part of your 'reconstruction of the crime' performance?"

"No part of my arrangements," replied Macdonald, "but things do sometimes happen like that when people's nerves are on edge. Did you tell anybody else that you were coming out here?"

"No. I didn't tell anyone anything about it. I think Keston followed me from the house. I heard his footsteps behind me, but took no notice, not being sure if it was part of your 'tour de force.' Are you satisfied with the evening's performance?"

Macdonald noted the flippant voice, and guessed that some of the nonchalance, at least, was assumed.

"I'm satisfied about one point," he replied. "I had no difficulty in recognizing you before you went into the cave. There must have been plenty of light to identify the professor by the other night. Now I wish you'd tell me exactly what you noticed when you were in the cave."

"Nothing much. It was black dark, and not exactly exhilarating. I lay down on the stone slab and listened. In a minute or two I heard footsteps and guessed they were Keston's—he's what I call an untidy walker. I could see the entrance of the cave quite easily—it looked quite light in comparison with the dense blackness inside. It was a bit eerie, and I had a horrid sort of feeling that the place was warmer, or stuffier, than it should have been. I suppose that was the contrast with the cool air outside, or it might have been just nerves; the professor always said the place was curiously warm." Lockersley paused and then went on: "I heard the footsteps drawing nearer—rather a queer feeling, as though I were being hunted by someone—and then at last I saw a black shape blot out the light from the entrance. It was rather curiously dramatic. I knew it was Keston,

but supposed he was there by arrangement with you. He came blundering across the cave, and actually touched my face. Then he gave voice—shrilled like a frightened bunny—and your light came on. That's all."

"Thanks very much. A very helpful description. You've got steady nerves, Mr. Lockersley. It can't have been a pleasant experience."

"It certainly was *not*." Lockersley's voice sounded almost cordial. "In fact, it was damned nasty. Keston's as near off his rocker as makes no difference, but I'm pretty certain of one thing. He wouldn't have the nerve to murder anybody. He was panting—I could hear it as he came near me—and his beastly cold hands were clammy with sweat when he touched me."

Lockersley and Macdonald were standing outside the cave, and Lockersley had lighted a cigarette. It was almost dark now, and Macdonald could only see the other's face when his cigarette glowed brightly. Lockersley went on:

"By the way, I've done the other thing you asked me to—written down the conversation before and during the time Rhodian came with me to the cave that Tuesday evening. Incidentally, I find the record rather illuminating. I don't know if it will appeal to you that way. I've also written down a number of odd facts which seem unrelated, but which may be useful to you when you come to assess the whole. Of course—" He broke off abruptly, and Macdonald asked:

"Of course—what?"

"Of course you are bound to suspect every fact I've put down, which is a pity, because a number of facts aren't verifiable unless some other person gives an equally accurate account of what occurred. Without indulging in solemn oaths, I can tell you that I believe there is not a single statement in this which isn't rigidly accurate."

He held out a sheaf of papers to Macdonald, who could see their whiteness in the gloom, and the latter took them, saying:

"Thanks very much. If you have achieved the standard of accuracy you claim, you are an unusual person."

"Actually, I have an accurate mind," said Lockersley. "You know, the further I seem to be involved in this tangle, the more it appeals to me that there might be a deadly fascination, not in murder itself, but in its method

and the avoidance of subsequent detection. Say if I, as murderer, had given you those papers, and that everything in them was in accordance with facts, and yet I could defy you to see the implication of those facts.”

“I can only reply that excess of assurance on the part of the murderer is as dangerous to him as lack of forethought,” replied Macdonald, and something in his tone made Lockersley chuckle.

“It seems to me that the trouble is that other people behave so oddly,” he went on. “Take Keston—he’s just following a hunch, like Hitler’s intuition. In Keston’s case it’s wishful thinking, of course. He believes I did it because he dislikes me. Incidentally, what did he mean when he kept on telling you to search me? What did he imagine I’d got on me?”

“I’ve been wondering that ever since he said it,” replied Macdonald, and Lockersley laughed.

“Well, take him at his word and search me, then. Come up to the house and search me in his presence, if you like.”

“No. I don’t think so. In the darkness you might have too many opportunities of throwing something away into the lake or the undergrowth. I think it would be a sound idea to search you, here and now, in the cave.”

“Righto. I’ve no objection, but how do you know that I haven’t thrown away—whatever it was—as I stood here?”

“Because I can see well enough to watch you, being reasonably cat-eyed, and hear well enough to know that you have neither dropped nor thrown away anything whatever.”

Again Lockersley laughed. “Is excess of assurance on the part of a detective dangerous?” he asked. “Let’s go back into the cave, and you can turn your torchlight on me.”

With Macdonald close beside him, they reentered the cave, and Macdonald switched on his torch and laid it on the hermit’s bed. Lockersley was dressed in a black dinner suit, the jacket buttoned over a soft shirt, with no waistcoat. He raised his hands and stood still while Macdonald ran his hands over him and then investigated the contents of his trousers pockets. These yielded a handkerchief, a packet of Players’ cigarettes and a gasoline lighter. The outer jacket pockets contained a letter, its envelope still stuck up.

“It came by the second post, and I haven’t had time to read it yet, but you can read it if you like. It’s only from my agent,” said Lockersley.

The small inner pocket of the dinner jacket contained something, however. Macdonald had felt the hard shape of some small object when he first ran his hands over Lockersley. He put his hand in the pocket and drew out something which appeared to be a small stone. He picked up his flashlight and directed it onto the object in his hand.

“What’s that?” inquired Lockersley.

“I’m not certain. It may be an uncut diamond, or it may not.”

“A diamond! Merry hell! The dirty dog . . . so that’s what he meant. What you call a plant in the best circles,” said Lockersley indignantly.

“Really, Mr. Keston, I wouldn’t have believed it of you.”

“Neither would I,” said Macdonald reflectively. “I take it you have no knowledge of how this thing arrived in your pocket?”

“I’ve no idea at all, because I didn’t know it was there,” replied Lockersley. “Believe me or not, it’s true.”

After dinner on that same evening Eve again tried to persuade her sister to go to bed early. Emmeline was in a nervous, exasperating frame of mind, and she seemed incapable of forgetting—or letting others forget—the one grim topic which was inevitably in all their minds. At dinner Bruce Rhodian tried gallantly to keep the conversation from the tragedy whose gloom hung over Valehead. He talked about his travels in various parts of the world, and he talked well. Eve had the relief of laughter, for Rhodian was amusing in his narratives. Lockersley had joined in, also making an effort toward light-hearted spontaneity, and talking much more vigorously than he usually did, supplementing Rhodian’s absurd stories of camping in various primitive parts of the world with reminiscences of his, Lockersley’s, wanderings in Europe, in what he chose to call his “optimistic and impecunious youth.”

Eve was grateful to both men, and she could have shaken Emma, who sat in silence, irritable and unamused.

After dinner, when coffee had been drunk, Rhodian had said he was going upstairs to pack the remainder of the things he had left in his room, and Lockersley, with a brief apology to Eve, said he had some writing to do.

When she was left alone with her sister Eve turned to her, saying, “Emma dear, I’m afraid you found them awfully wearing, but they meant well. Why not go to bed and try to have a good long night’s sleep? You look worn out.”

“I can’t sleep, and I can’t bear the thought of going to bed,” responded Emma. “I can’t imagine how you manage to be so light-hearted, Eve, laughing away so happily, as though you hadn’t a care in the world. This thing is simply haunting me. I can’t get away from it. Heaven alone knows what is going to happen next. One of us may be arrested, and how can we prove we didn’t do it?”

“Oh, Emma, don’t be so morbid! Why on earth should it be supposed that you or I killed our own father? It’s horrible—and stupid—to even say such things. You can’t do any good by brooding over a thing. Try to forget it.”

“I *can’t* forget it. I’m not like you. I keep on thinking about those diamonds. I’m sure they’re the crux of the whole thing, and I’m equally sure that Keston took them. But the point is, *I* knew about them. Father told me. The police can prove I was awfully pressed for money—”

“Emma, I simply *refuse* to let you go on talking like this. It’s not fair to me, and I won’t have it. If you were in need of money, you could have had it, either from Father or from me, with all the good will in the world. You’d only got to say so.”

It was in vain that Eve tried to “talk sense” to her sister. Emma was obstinately morbid, her nerves on edge to a degree which horrified Eve.

The time dragged on, and grayness stole over the world, while Emmeline sat obstinately knitting, either recapitulating her theories about the professor’s death, or else recalling old histories of crime and criminals. Eve got up at last and switched the lights on.

“Don’t do that. Anyone can see in through the windows,” said Mrs. Stamford.

“There’s nobody to see, Emma, but it’s getting on for blackout time. I’ll pull the curtains. Then I’m going to have a drink. I think this is one of the rare occasions when a good strong whiskey and soda appeals to me. Won’t you have a drink too? You like a gin and lime, don’t you?”

“Not now. It’d make me sick. I wouldn’t mind a cup of tea.”

“Good. I’ll go and get you one. I expect the Carters have gone to bed. It’s nearly eleven. I lose count of time these long light evenings.”

“Where are the others—Mr. Rhodian and Mr. Lockersley? They haven’t been in to say good night?”

“I don’t know. They may have gone for a walk. I’m afraid I’m a very unpunctilious hostess; I never bother about the good nights and good mornings. I’d better look round and see if Carter’s blacked out everywhere. We generally get to bed before it’s dark these days. I won’t be long.”

Eve Merrion found it a relief to be by herself in the cheerful kitchen, with its well scrubbed surfaces and shining pots and pans. It all looked so sane and healthy and normal. The morning tea trays were there, daintily laid, and two large cups and saucers and a big brown teapot for Mr. and Mrs. Carter. Eve filled the electric kettle, switched it on and then went to the dining room and did a thing she very seldom did—poured herself out a good stiff drink and swallowed it. “A nice way to behave, my dear,” she apostrophized herself. “If Emma insists on sitting up much longer I shall get drunk. Otherwise I shall go raving mad. Dear, dear. That’s better. . . .”

She returned to the kitchen, made the tea, found some biscuits and returned to Mrs. Stamford.

“A nice cup-er-tea, love. Always recommended in air raids and other emergencies. Goodness, how I’d welcome an air raid now. Just a private one, for us alone, no one else included.”

“Eve! I believe you’ve been drinking. . . .”

Eve Merrion laughed aloud. “I have, my dear. As long a one as I could lower. It did me a power of good, too. Why not follow suit?”

“I just can’t understand you,” said Emma, and Eve retorted:

“Then why try? Shall we have the wireless on and see if we can find something to suit our case? Sorry if I sound flippant, Emma, but neither weeping, wailing nor gnashing of teeth is going to help us, and to worry oneself into a nervous breakdown won’t help any, as Bruce Rhodian would say. How do you like him, Emma? I think he makes rather a good foil to Lockersley, who’s generally so deceptively stolid. Do you remember that man Staines, who tried to make love to us alternately in the long ago?”

Eve kept up her rather futile chatter as she poured out tea for her sister and moved about the room tidying things up—anything was better than letting Emma indulge in her melancholy reflections. Suddenly Emma said: “Eve, what’s that? What’s that? Somebody is moving about in the hall. Is it that detective again?”

Eve went to the door and opened it to find Bruce Rhodian standing outside.

“Sorry if I rattled you, Mrs. Merrion. I thought you would all have gone to bed.”

“My sister doesn’t feel like ‘early to bed,’” responded Eve. “We’ve been making tea. Would you like some, or there’s a drink in the dining room, if you’d prefer that. I’m afraid the tea’s rather cold now.”

“I like cold tea,” he replied cheerfully, and as he came into the room Emmeline demanded abruptly:

“Where have you been, and what have you been doing, and where is Mr. Lockersley?”

“I went for a walk in the gloaming and met Carter,” responded Rhodian. “He and I yarned a bit; he’s a real old sailor.”

“Did you see Mr. Lockersley?”

“I did, as a matter of fact, and Keston, too. They were both down at the cave, with the chief inspector.”

“What for?”

Mrs. Stamford’s voice was breathless, and Rhodian shot a glance at her before he replied:

“I’ve no notion, Mrs. Stamford. I reckon the inspector was getting on with his job, though what his procedure was I’ve no idea. Perhaps Lockersley will tell you. As for Keston, I reckon he butted in when he wasn’t wanted, just as I did. Anyway, Keston and I were asked to remove ourselves. Carter had done that already. He didn’t wait to be asked.”

Emmeline turned to her sister, her voice low and tense:

“Keston was there, Eve. I *know* he’s mixed up in all this. I’ve felt it all along.”

“I reckon it’s better not to have feelings of that kind just now, Mrs. Stamford,” put in Rhodian crisply. “When it comes to ‘feelings’—well,

they're just a bit too subjective. Keston has got 'feelings' about Lockersley, and gave voice to them. I've been telling him all the way up the drive he's just a darned fool. He's let his nerves get the better of him, and now he just doesn't know what he's saying."

"Poor dear!" It was Eve's voice which sounded so sympathetic. "He's just frantic with worry and unhappiness, but I *do* wish he wouldn't go about saying such silly things. Mr. Rhodian, that tea is perfectly revolting! Come along to the kitchen and make some more, if you really want tea. I should have thought a proper drink would have suited you better."

"I like tea," Rhodian replied. "I'll go and brew another pot. Don't you bother."

He picked up the pot and made for the door, Eve following him. As they crossed the hall she said to him:

"My sister's nearly driving me mad! Sorry to complain. I don't often, but I've got to the state when it's a comfort to have someone to grumble to. I had such a crazy idea this evening: I suddenly thought, if only Father were here, he'd be so helpful."

"I guess I know just what you mean," said Rhodian quietly. "It's too bad. You're getting the brunt of it all. There's Mrs. Stamford and Keston both heading for a nervous breakdown, Lockersley going round playing detective and looking ominous, Carter all of a dither, and the Bradys praying to all the saints in turn, and muttering in the corridors. As I say, it's rough luck on you."

"Oh, I shall survive, but it's all too utterly grim just at present," said Eve forlornly. "It's the sort of thing which happens to other people, not to oneself."

They made a fresh pot of tea and returned to the drawing room. Lockersley had come in, and Keston was standing in the doorway glaring at him. Eve spoke with sharp decision in her voice.

"Emma, come up to bed. It's late, and I'm not going to sit up any longer. Mr. Keston, you look tired out, too. Pour out a cup of tea if you want one, and then go to bed, too. We shall all get on each other's nerves if we stay up any longer. Come on, Emma. Mr. Lockersley, please bolt the front door and put out the light when you and Mr. Rhodian go up, and don't stop up all night, please."

Emmeline Stamford collected her knitting and went to the door with her sister. Eve said:

“Good night, everybody. Sorry to be abrupt, but I’m dog tired.”

Keston held the door open for the two women as the others murmured good night, and then closed it behind him as Eve and Emma went upstairs. Rhodian poured out his cup of tea, saying:

“Reckon I’ll take this upstairs with me. The trouble is there’s been too much talking already. Everyone’s jittered.”

“Yes. So it seems,” said Lockersley. He spoke almost absent-mindedly, and then added, “I think I know who did it. I know why they did it. I think I know how they did it, but some of the details are confusing. Someone’s playing the goat, or else they’ve lost their nerve.”

“Well, you don’t seem to have lost yours,” replied Rhodian. “Congratulations on your Sherlocking, but I’d rather wait for the official verdict. Amateur detectives leave me stone cold.”

He walked to the door carrying his cup of tea and opened it quietly. Keston stood outside, his face white.

“I heard what you said.”

The words were thrown at Lockersley, who shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“Just what I expected of you. That’s why I said it,” he replied. “What is far more important than what I said is—what *you* did.”

“Oh, put a sock in it,” said Rhodian quite good-temperedly. “You poetic blokes are too fond of a good curtain. This one isn’t yours. It’s mine. Come along, little man. I’m going to put you to bed. You might get quarreling if you stay up any longer, and that’d put the lid on it.” He took Keston by the arm and turned to Lockersley. “Go to bed, pudding face. You’re being tiresome.” Lockersley grinned at him, but Keston allowed himself to be led off without another word.



9

It was in the small hours that Macdonald got back to the room he had taken in the village, but he did not go straight to bed. Far from feeling sleepy, he was particularly alert and intensely interested in the case he was studying. He found that his landlady had thoughtfully left him a kettle and spirit lamp and a tray with teapot, tea and milk, and he boiled the kettle, filled his pipe and settled down at length with a good brew of tea to write up his notes and get his ideas into order.

First Macdonald studied the sheets which Lockersley had handed to him. There is an assumption on the part of many people that poets, painters and musicians are inevitably muddle-minded and impractical persons apart from the art they practice. There was certainly nothing muddled or impractical about David Lockersley. Having read the neatly typed pages which the young man had handed to him, Macdonald sat back and contemplated for a little. Lockersley was undoubtedly a clear-headed thinker, and an accurate and dispassionate observer. There was something startling, to Macdonald's mind, in the way Lockersley had set down many of the facts concerning which Macdonald himself had made careful, though veiled, inquiry. The reconstruction of the conversation which Macdonald had asked for was also given in careful detail.

When Macdonald settled to his own notes, he considered three channels of reference: his own inquiries, including both his interrogation of the people at Valehead House and the telephone inquiries he had set on foot earlier in the evening, the facts elicited by the local force, and young Lockersley's statement. Macdonald began, as he had asked Eve Merriam to begin, with the evening preceding the professor's return to Valehead. He remembered Eve's statement: "Everything was perfectly ordinary before then."

On the Tuesday, then, Mrs. Stamford had arrived at Valehead and had dined with her sister and her sister's guests. After dinner, Lockersley had taken Rhodian to see the Hermit's Cave, and Keston had followed them. Mrs. Stamford had remained in the house with her sister, save for a short walk in the grounds. At nine o'clock had come the professor's telephone call, when he had spoken to Eve and told her that he was returning to Valehead the next day, instead of on Thursday, as he had originally planned. He was traveling by the one-thirty train from Paddington to Enster.

At ten o'clock that same evening another trunk call had been put through, this time a personal call for Bruce Rhodian. Both these facts were also set down in Lockersley's statement, and the latter had added that Rhodian said his own call was concerning business with the cinematograph company who were producing what he called "his own film," based on his famous travel book. The only other facts concerning Tuesday evening were given by Lockersley, who stated that he had gone for a walk in the woods at eleven o'clock that evening and had returned about midnight. He had heard two sets of footsteps while he was out: one of these he was sure was Keston's, because he walked clumsily in the half-light. The other might have been Carter's; the latter was still up when Lockersley reentered the house about midnight.

Rhodian had told Mrs. Merrion that he would have to go up to town first thing on Wednesday morning when he had said good night to her on the Tuesday, and Eve had said that she would order a taxi for nine o'clock in the morning, in order that he might drive to Starford Station to catch the nine-thirty train for London, which connected up with the express from Tawmouth to Enster.

Consequently breakfast on Wednesday morning had been ordered for eight-thirty. Rhodian, Lockersley and Mrs. Merrion had breakfasted together, and Lockersley had said that he would go out for a long tramp by himself. He had collected sandwiches from Mrs. Carter immediately after breakfast, and had not been seen by anybody in the household after nine-fifteen.

Macdonald was interested in this fact because someone had taken the trouble to write an anonymous letter to the police saying that Lockersley had been seen on the London to Enster train on the Wednesday afternoon—the same train by which the professor had traveled. Macdonald pondered

over this piece of information for some time. He was well accustomed to the odd, irrelevant, frequently inaccurate bits of information which were sent to the police in the shape of anonymous letters during every big case while it was being investigated. He could not quite see what—if any—bearing on his case this statement about Lockersley might have, but he made a note of the fact that it might have been possible for Lockersley to have reached Enster Station by ten twenty-five on Wednesday morning, if he had got a lift on the high road to Enster. In this case, he could have reached Reading in time to pick up the professor's train, which stopped there at two-thirty.

“And what sense there is to be made out of that, I don't quite follow,” said Macdonald to himself. He turned to the report he had received from the railway company. All tickets issued on the Wednesday from Starford or Enster had been duly given up at their appropriate destinations. Bruce Rhodian, as Macdonald knew from the station master at Starford, had taken a monthly return to Paddington, and both halves of his ticket had been duly given up.

Again Macdonald pondered over the anonymous letter. It was a very commonplace production, written in untidy block capitals penciled on very cheap paper. It ran: “Mr. Lockersley, who is staying at Valehead House, was seen on the 1:30 train, Paddington to Enster, on Wednesday, June 26th.”

If there were any truth in this statement, it looked as though Lockersley had found it necessary, for reasons unknown, to see the professor before the latter returned to Valehead, but Macdonald doubted very much if this were the case. The professor had been a very truthful, straightforward and outspoken man, and Macdonald doubted if he would have allowed Eve Merriam to have gone on worrying about Lockersley's continued absence in the mist had he—the professor—known that the young man had never set out on his famous walk.

Returning to ascertained facts, Macdonald noted that the professor had arrived at Enster at five o'clock, and had there changed into the Starford train, arriving at the latter station at five-thirty, and having been driven to Valehead by the local garage proprietor. Macdonald had already made inquiries of the railway company concerning the ticket inspector and guard on the professor's train, and had made arrangements to see them in London on the following day.

The chief inspector's next consideration was concerning the stone he had found in Lockersley's pocket, which he was pretty certain was an uncut diamond. Two points stood out concerning this discovery, one being Keston's imperative injunction "Search him," and the other Lockersley's nonchalance when he himself had said, "What did Keston mean when he kept on telling you to search me?" and his further suggestion that Macdonald should do as Keston had demanded. In spite of his own assurance to Lockersley to the contrary, Macdonald knew that such a small object as the diamond could have been disposed of in the semi-darkness without being noticed. A variety of interpretations could be put on the incident. Keston might have "planted" the stone in Lockersley's pocket, as the latter had suggested. Lockersley might have put it in his own pocket deliberately, and jumped at the opportunity provided for bringing suspicion on Keston owing to the latter's insistence on a search—but if Lockersley had wanted to dispose of such a small object between Keston's suggestion and his own reiteration of it, he could certainly have done so.

Before he went to bed Macdonald made notes of various things to be done in the morning. Turner could try his hand at tracing the anonymous letter concerning Lockersley. It had been posted locally, and if the writer were a local inhabitant, it was probable that Turner could run him to earth. Then there was an inquiry to be made of the friend with whom Professor Crewdon had stayed during his absence from Valehead. Then there was the matter of the diamonds, which gave Macdonald food for much thought. He could search the whole of the house, and ransack everybody's belongings, but he very much doubted if such a proceeding would bring him any nearer to the object of his search. Now that the matter of the diamonds had come to light, as it inevitably had to do once his own investigation was under way, it would have been only too easy to dispose of the stones—bury them, put them in the river or lake, hide them in the woods. It was doubtful if direct search would help him there.

Finally there was the matter of seeing the professor's solicitor. This now seemed to Macdonald to be one of those necessary routine formalities, not very promising of results. He thought that he would probably telephone to Mr. Layton in the morning, and make an appointment to see him in London, rather than waiting to see him at Valehead.

Four hours of sleep were enough for Macdonald. When Turner came in to see the chief inspector shortly before nine the next morning, the latter had already had his breakfast.

“’Morning. Valehead’s been on the phone early this morning. Mrs. Merrion rang up to know if there was any objection to her sister going back to town. It seems Mrs. Stamford’s too nervy to stay at Valehead any longer. Wants to go to town to see her doctor, and they say Mr. Rhodian’s going up and can escort her. I told them I’d let them know shortly. I take it you want them to stay here?”

“No. I don’t think so,” rejoined Macdonald. “If Mrs. Stamford wants to go back to London, she can go. I shall want to know where she’s going to stay, of course. I’ll come across and ring up Mrs. Merrion. I’m going up to town myself, too, this morning.”

Turner shrugged his shoulders, his face more than a little exasperated.

“I suppose you know your own business best,” he replied, “or perhaps you’ve come to the conclusion the whole thing’s a mare’s nest, and the old chap lit the brazier himself. Might have been suicide, of course. I’ve always thought there was a possibility of that.”

“No. I think it was murder, undoubtedly,” replied Macdonald.

Turner stared. “And yet you’re letting one of ’em clear off?” he inquired indignantly. “It’s different with young Rhodian, he wasn’t even here that night, but Mrs. Stamford—I’ve always thought she was concealing something. Too high and mighty altogether.”

“From my point of view, it will be easier to keep an eye on her in London than here,” replied Macdonald. “I’ve more men up there for one thing. You can’t police Valehead with a man and a half.”

The chief inspector went to the phone at Turner’s headquarters and rang through to Valehead House.

“Is that Mrs. Merrion? Inspector Macdonald speaking. If your sister wants to go to London she’s at liberty to do so, but I should like to know where she will be staying, in case I need her as a witness.”

Macdonald heard the sigh of relief from the other end of the wire.

“Thank you so much for ringing up, Chief Inspector. My sister will be so thankful to get away, and honestly I shall be glad for her to go. She’s nearly frantic with nerves, and I’m getting to the state when I may snap

back any minute. She will be staying at her club—the Fortescue Imperial in Conduit Street. Mr. Rhodian is going back to town today, and he can look after my sister in the train. She's really pretty shaky. This unhappy business has simply shaken her to bits."

"Yes. I realized her nerves were in a bad state," replied Macdonald. "You will be glad to be alone for a bit, I expect. Is Mr. Lockersley staying on with you?"

"I suppose so. I haven't asked him—anyway, he's no trouble. He just wanders about by himself and keeps out of everybody's way."

"I think it would be a good idea if he kept out of Mr. Keston's way," said Macdonald. "You might see if you could arrange it. Meantime, I shan't be coming to bother you today, so I suggest you spend a long day in the rose garden."

She laughed a little, amusement and sadness mingled in the sound.

"That's just what I intend to do. I can't help anyone by tearing my hair, can I? I should be much better employed rooting up bindweed and cutting back brambles."

Macdonald put through a call to Mr. Layton, the professor's solicitor, asking him if he could see him at Valehead the following day, before he rejoined the rather disgruntled Turner.

"I'm leaving Reeves at Valehead; he's a useful observer, and will keep an eye on things there. I shall drive into Enster to catch the ten-thirty and leave my car there. I wish you'd do your best to find the writer of that letter about Lockersley. I feel it's a local effort, and there's probably some gossip going round which will help you."

Turner nodded. "Gossip? You've said it. Everyone's gossiping. I can't see the sense of that bit about Lockersley. Probably invented by some busybody. The fact is that when London people come down and take a place like Valehead there's always gossip in a place like this, without mysterious deaths to give it a fillip. Half the folk in the village were gossiping about the professor and Keston, and Mrs. Merrion and her young men visitors, long before that cave business."

Macdonald nodded. "Life in the country would be almighty dull if it weren't enlivened by conjectures about infiltrating 'foreigners,'" he replied. "I've often found the local gossips very useful, but in this case I've a hunch

that the local pundits can't help much. However, you listen in at the local bars, and see if you can pick up anything about anybody who is interested in Lockersley's movements."

The members of the country's police organizations, whether local police or metropolitan, have a great advantage over amateur investigators. When Macdonald arrived at Enster, he was told by the railway authorities that Mrs. Stamford and Bruce Rhodian were traveling in the front coach of the Starford train, and that the main line train, which Macdonald was boarding, would be coupled to the front of the Starford train. He had only to get in the rear coach of the main line train and he would be quite close to Mrs. Stamford's compartment when the sections were coupled. While he was at Enster, Macdonald also had the chance of speaking to the ticket inspector who had been on duty on the one-thirty train from Paddington by which the professor had traveled on the Wednesday. This man—William Denton, an Enster man, and a railway servant of long standing—remembered Professor Crewdon quite clearly when Macdonald described him. The professor, with his noticeable height and fine sweep of white hair, was an easy person to describe, and not an easy one to forget.

"Yes, I call him to mind," said the ticket inspector. "A very fine looking old gentleman, I remember thinking, and I had a word or two with him. Very pleasant he was. Now let me think. It'd have been between Reading and Westbury I looked at his ticket. Yes. That was it. He was in the front of the train—the first coach—in a corner seat facing the engine. The train was pretty full, but the corridor in that coach was clear, though some of them at the rear were crowded. What was it you wanted to know, sir?"

"So far as you could tell, had he any friend traveling with him? Did you notice him talking to anyone?"

"No, sir, I don't think he had anyone with him. They were all service men and their folk in that compartment, I seem to remember—sailors, and a few R.A.F. lads and one boy in khaki. The old gentleman chatted to them a bit, I think, but mostly he was reading. I saw him get out at Enster, and he was alone then."

"You're sure there wasn't a civilian in the same compartment, a tall, heavily built young man, with fair hair and rather sulky eyes?"

“Not in that compartment, sir. I was in there several minutes, for one of the R.A.F. boys had lost his ticket. No, barring the old gentleman, they was all service chaps, and two of them had their wives with them. No one else.”

Macdonald settled down as comfortably as he could in one of the few vacant seats left to choose from in the rear coach of the London train. It happened to be in a non-smoking compartment, and he went out into the corridor after a while to stretch his legs and smoke. He hadn't been there many minutes when a voice behind him said:

“Hello. Be a good soul and give me a light.”

Rhodian stood beside him, grinning cheerfully as Macdonald offered his gasoline lighter.

“I'm escorting Mrs. Stamford, as you probably know,” said Rhodian. “I think she's gone to sleep, and I'm sure I hope so. Cassandra also ran. She beats the band for melancholy.”

“I gathered from what Mrs. Merrion said that her sister was feeling rather under the weather.”

“She's under the worst depression any aneroid ever registered. You know, if she'd stayed on at Valehead, she'd have gone plain bats. So should I, for that matter. They're just too much for me.”

“In what way?”

Rhodian held up one brown hand and ticked off his points on his lean fingers.

“One poet, given to Sherlocking, tense with atmosphere; one archeologist, given to snooping, frightened to bits; one Irishman, mad as they make 'em, given to prophesying; one big tough, given to drinking cider, frightened of ghosts; and finally, one exceedingly nice hostess, given to gardening, being driven crazy by all the others. If, in addition to that little selection, you had the dame in there, jittering at all of 'em, the atmospherics would be too lively for a commonplace bloke lacking imagination, like me.”

“It sounds full of possibilities,” agreed Macdonald. “What examples have you had of the amateur Sherlocking—anything spectacular?”

“Only dramatic statements. Lockersley came in last night after he'd been playing his piece with you. Mrs. Merrion and her sister had gone up to bed, but Keston and I provided the audience. Lockersley said, ‘I think I

know who did it. I think I know how he did it. I think I know *why* he did it.’ Keston was on the other side of the door, but he heard all right. Can you beat it? I took him to bed, and stayed with him till he was in bed.”

“Lockersley’s a bit rash, going round making statements of that kind.”

“Just hot air. Spoken for effect—but Keston isn’t the sort of bird to annoy that way. Anyway, I’m glad to be out of it. Oh, by the way, Mrs. Merrion had an idea yesterday evening about how the old man lighted the charcoal in that brazier. Did she tell you?”

“No. I haven’t seen her again. What was it?”

“Meta Fuel. You know the stuff. The professor had got a big packet of it.”

“Had he? Well, it’s certainly an idea.”

“But no means of proving it, I suppose, unless you had some of the ash analyzed. Would it leave traces?”

“I should think so. I’ll look into it.”

Rhodian grinned. “I suppose you think us poor mutts for making suggestions. I know most of mine are pretty imbecile, but I thought Mrs. Merrion’s idea about the Meta Fuel might be a possibility. I wish for her sake you could get the whole business cleared up. She’s as straight and good a soul as ever breathed, and it’s just darned hard on her.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. I can assure you I shan’t loiter more than necessary. I hear you’re busy on a film stunt. Enjoying it?”

Rhodian laughed, showing his fine white teeth.

“Not all that, it’s pretty fair bunk. I shan’t be there when they show the premiere, I tell you. But some of the photography’s good. It ought to be. I risked my life twenty times a day exposing some of that film. The scenario’s pretty fair muck—studio stuff, human appeal and heart throb. Sick making, but they offered me a contract which was worth considering, and I’m not one of these purists. I started the travel stuff for the fun of it: I liked it, but I don’t dislike money. Leastways, I don’t suppose so. I’ve never had any yet.”

He threw his cigarette end out of the window, adding, “I’d better go back and be ready to do the sympathetic friend act. It’s a darned funny show. I seem to have tumbled into the story with the lid off. I’ve heard all

the funny stuff, diamonds and that. Punk. I don't believe in any of it. The old boy lighted his brazier to warm himself, or else to assist his own incantations, and just swallowed a whiff of the deadliest gas an innocent looking substance can produce. Keston and his nerves and Lockersley and his sleuthing are just local color. They'd neither of them murder a fly. Neither would the dame in there. She's frightened of her own shadow. Carter's a tough, but a damn silly one. Brady's an Irishman and superstitious. He wouldn't have gone near that cave at midnight for all the gold of Ophir. That's got them all taped for you."

"Thanks," murmured Macdonald. "I enjoyed your analysis. Most enlightening."

"Sez you. If I were asked who, of the company in the house yesterday, was most capable of murder, I should have chosen *you*. You've an air of quiet competence."

"Again, thanks."

"Not at all. Are you going to check up on alibis, or whatever it is a detective does?"

"Probably. Do you know Lockersley at all, apart from having met him at Valehead?"

"No. Never happened across him. Don't you believe all that Keston suggests. Lockersley's no vice in him, you can see that at a glance. If it's true he's got a mistress, he was probably nabbed by her when he was composing poetry. In any case, all my sympathy goes out to the lady. See you later, I hope."

"Thanks," reiterated Macdonald.

MACDONALD saw Rhodian again just before the train reached Paddington. "No use asking you to eat with me somewhere this evening?" inquired the latter, but Macdonald shook his head.

"Afraid not. I've got a spot of work to do, one way and the other."

"A pity. I should have liked it. I'm going along to the film studio to see a run through, after I've got rid of my spot of bother in there." He indicated the compartment where Mrs. Stamford was seated, and his grin was not very respectful.

"You're intending to get back to the States pretty soon, I gather?" inquired Macdonald, and Rhodian nodded.

"Yes. In a week or two. Depends on when the Clipper will take me. One can't make one's own plans these days. They're made for one. So long. Glad I met you, though sorry the occasion called for your services."

He turned back toward his compartment, his face still alight with the friendly grin which had so much vital enjoyment in it.

Macdonald went direct to his own department at C.O., the Commissioner's Office, as Scotland Yard is known to the police. Here he found Peter Vernon waiting for him. Vernon was a journalist and a very able one. He had been friends with Macdonald for years, and apart from liking Vernon, the C.I.D. man found him useful on many occasions, on account of Vernon's extensive knowledge of people. If he did not actually know the person Macdonald was interested in, Vernon could nearly always "dig up a contact." He was never discouraged, no matter how difficult the task Macdonald set him in the way of making improbable acquaintances, and always willing to try.

Sitting in Macdonald's rather comfortless official armchair, smoking a deplorable pipe, Vernon inquired, "What cheer, Jock? A true bill?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, yes," replied Macdonald. "However, neither knowledge nor belief is very extensive yet. Do you know this lad Lockersley?"

"Haven't you a passion for getting your own questions answered while leaving other people's natural curiosity unsatisfied," grumbled Vernon.

Macdonald sat down and glanced at his watch. "I've got time to listen to your always valuable but frequently garrulous reports, but I haven't time to compete in the word-spinning game. You shall have your pound of flesh in due time—meantime, get on with it."

"I thought you were going to forget yourself to the extent of saying 'go to it,'" replied Vernon. "Why do other people's slogans so often sound so poor? Now, about Lockersley. As it happens, I do know him, if you can call it knowing him to have drunk vodka—so-called—and imbibed sausages—also so-called—in his company. I think he told me I was a sanguinary fool, and I replied suitably. I like him. Also I like his work. Lockersley, oh philistine of Cannon Row, is a poet. Not quite in the front rank, but not far removed. He has all the right qualifications, including a belief in democracy, and a passion for pacifism of the type shown by the International Brigade—stout fellas. He can be sure of getting his stuff printed in papers like the *New Chancellor*, *New Speech* and all that. Obviously he's poor. No visible means of support, as you chaps say—except his writing. In terms of lucre it's not the world's richest proposition. He lives in Camden Town, and Rebecca Grale lives with him. At least, they live together in theory, and share the latch key, so to speak, but they're hardly ever there together. Lockersley's mad on the country. He turns tramp for weeks together, and Rebecca's a passion for painting Irish bogs. I think the cohabiting effect has been assumed as a token of mutual independence, and a gesture against the phrasing of the book of Common Prayer. Lockersley, I can assure you, is a sound lad. He's generous and kindly, and has an honest respect for the craft of letters. Anything else you want to know?"

"His address, if you can bring yourself to be so explicit, and a further line on his personal habits. I gather, from your opening, that you met him at

a cocktail party. Is he one of the new poor who enjoy the fleshpots of Bloomsbury?"

"The cocktail party at which I met him was a riot in an attic in Hampstead, given by a Czech in honor of a Russian. Mostly they spoke French, and there were ten nationalities represented among fifteen guests, most of whom sat on the stairs, because the capacity of the room only ran to six. What you really mean is, does Lockersley like purple and fine linen. Money, to put it plainly. He does not. I never met a chap who cared for money less. He could make pots if he chose. He doesn't choose. Here's his address, but if you're a party to hanging him, you ought to be lynched."

"Thanks. I shall doubtless get my deserts in due time. For your information, Lockersley seemed to be quite enjoying the very comfortable house he is staying in, and he's not too democratic to despise a well cut dinner jacket. Any sidelights on my other acquaintance, Bruce Rhodian?"

"Lawks! You've been going it. All the winners in the literary sweepstakes. I reviewed his book. He can write, I'll say that for him. I never enjoyed a travel book more. It takes a lot to make me laugh out loud when I'm reading to earn my living, but I laughed over his until I rocked. I reckon he can live on the proceeds of that book until he shuffles off this mortal what not—"

"If you want to quote, for the good Lord's sake don't interlard decent English with your own corrupt idioms," cut in Macdonald. "Have you met Rhodian, too, in the course of your illiterate career?"

"He's not the sort of chap a poor bloke meets," replied Vernon. "He's being publicized, run by agents who see to it that he meets profitable persons. I've heard him speak, after dinner speech at Grosvenor House, and good at that. He doesn't swank and doesn't blether. He's out to make money, in the best Yank tradition, and I don't blame him. I'd do it myself if I saw how. Rhodian has all the qualities to insure success. He's got the pioneering spirit and guts enough to face any danger; he's got imagination, and the capacity to write of what he's seen, and he can laugh at himself, which is the most endearing trait I know in any chap whose actions come perilously near the heroic."

"Hm . . . quite enthusiastic. Anything on the debit side of the picture?"

"Not that I've heard of. People like him. He's been the most run-after man in town these past months, and most women fall for him at sight, but

it's said that he's straight, and doesn't exploit the situation. Is it true he's keen on the woman he's been staying with—Axel Merrion's widow?"

"I can't say. She's a charming woman in a quiet way. What do you know about her?"

"Nothing except that she's Axel Merrion's widow, and inherited his fortune. He was a great man, and very generous to the journalists' benevolent. Look here, Jock. I've talked the deuce of a lot. Tell me this. Was Professor Crewdon murdered?"

"I believe so, but it's not for publication yet. The inquest's been adjourned pending inquiries. It might be worth your while to attend the next session. I'll let you know."

"What's the place like—Valehead?"

"Beautiful."

Macdonald uttered only that one word, but Vernon caught the sincerity of the quiet voice and cocked an angular eyebrow. That one word from Macdonald meant more than rhapsodies from more talkative people.

"Is it? I think I'd like to see it," said Vernon, and Macdonald replied:

"Yes, I think you would, but not just now, Peter. If you go there, others will follow you, and I should hate to let Fleet Street loose in Valehead. Wait until I give you the word—and now thanks very much for all your help. I've got to get a move on."

"See you this evening?"

"I think not. I shall probably go down to Devon again."

"Is Lockersley still there?"

"I think so. He was this morning. Rhodian traveled up on the same train as I did, with Mrs. Merrion's sister—the latter best part of the way towards a nervous breakdown."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. Probably just nerves—possibly something else. I don't know. . . ."

When Macdonald left his office he went straight to the address in Camden Town which Vernon had given him. Lockersley had given his club address to Turner, and Macdonald wanted to know what sort of place he lived in. The address turned out to be that of a studio in the garden of a

house between Chalk Farm Station and the Albert Road. Macdonald rang the bell and the door was opened by a charwoman, a typical, wizened, alert looking little Cockney. She did not wait for Macdonald to speak but informed him, unasked:

“She’s out. Going to be out all day, and going away again tomorrow, so that’s that.”

“Oh. How disappointing. Is Mr. Lockersley here?”

“Him? No. Not been here for weeks. Why? Is he coming today? I was just doing a nice bit o’ scrubbing. Not too soon, either. Filthy, the place is, and what’d you expect, shut up for weeks at a time as it is. I call it a crying shame, for they’ve got some nice bits and pieces. Ought to move ’em, I reckon, before Jerry blows ’em out. If you want to come in and wait, you’ll have to put up with me scrubbing. Got to get me work done.”

“Of course. I don’t want to disturb you, but I should like to wait a bit and see if Mr. Lockersley does turn up.”

“That’s okay. You can come in. I knows a gentleman when I sees one—*and* a lady. *She’s* a lady, though you’d never believe it, living as they do. Oh, well. Takes all sorts to make a world, and they don’t make no bones about it, this pair. Not ’ypocrites. Can’t stand ’ypocrites. Never could.”

The lively charlady preceded Macdonald into the studio, and he stood and looked around him. It was a fine spacious place, with a great north light in the roof above a model’s platform at one end. The walls had been painted in cream, a pleasant matt surface; half the floor was carpeted, the other half plain boards. A film of dust lay on most of the furniture, and the curtains had that dusty, dull look which told of long disuse in the London atmosphere, but the studio was a very charming apartment; there was a gallery at one end which evidently did service as a bedroom, and a doorway led into a kitchenette. Macdonald sat down in a big Spanish chair and talked cheerfully to the charwoman, who went down on her knees to scrub the floor at the farther end of the studio.

“When they are both away, I suppose the place is shut up,” he inquired, “or do you come in and clean it, Mrs. . . . ?”

“Briggs is the name,” she volunteered. “No. I don’t do no cleaning when they’re both away, but I oblige if I can when Miss Grale comes here. I been in the country meself for months—bombed out I was, and fed up with

the 'ole show, but all them fields got on me nerves. Couldn't stand it. So I come back, and Miss Grale, she was real pleased to see me. Said I could sleep in 'ere a bit, until I got fixed up somewhere, but lor, this place'd give me the pip. Them pictures and all. It was locked up for months. They left the keys with Mr. Sutton next door, just in case of them insanitary bombs. Miss Grale, she 'ad one lot of keys, and she kep' hers, but Mr. Lockersley gave his to Mr. Sutton, him being a warden. I like Mr. Lockersley meself. Not seen him for months, though. You're an 'opeful one if you expect to see 'im 'ere. 'E always forgets an appointment as soon as he's made it, but then what's the use of being a poet if you can't forget things? Are you a poet, if I might ask, or do you paint them things they calls pictures?"

"Neither," replied Macdonald, and she stopped her scrubbing to give him a shrewd glance.

"No. You look as though you'd more sense," she replied.

Macdonald chuckled a little, and then inquired, "Do you know if Mr. Lockersley's been staying here lately? I wondered if he'd called for his letters or anything like that."

"Well, he hasn't, and that I do know," she replied. "No one's been here for weeks till Miss Grale come 'ome—if you like to call it 'ome—two nights ago. She wrote to Mr. Sutton and asked him to get someone to come in and do a bit of cleaning and bring the laundry in, and that, and as I was an old friend, so to speak, Mr. Sutton told me to do what I could. 'E gave me the keys, and I come in and found piles of letters on the floor, mostly bills. If you've written to him here, you'll likely find your own letter on the bookshelf there. Miss Grale hasn't sent them on yet. I reckon no one had been in the place for weeks, you could see by the dust on the floor. You mightn't believe it, but I've dusted till I'm tired, and it's all as bad as ever in two-tvos."

Macdonald got up and glanced through the pile of letters which Mrs. Briggs indicated—from the look of them, as she said, they were mostly bills.

"It's not much use my waiting if Mr. Lockersley hasn't got my letter," he observed. "I suppose you can't say when you expect him back here?"

"I don't," she observed succinctly, sitting back on her heels. "Shouldn't be surprised if he never came back. He's not what I'd call a stayer, and I reckon Miss Grale gets fed up with him proper. Clever he may be, but

tiresome—my eye! I’ve said to ’er more’n once, I’ve said, you’re too good for this sort of hokey pokey, and ’e’s not worth an honest woman’s bothering about him. ’Tisn’t even as though she’d got her living to earn,” she ended solemnly, and returned to her scrubbing for a moment, and then added as an afterthought, “Not that I’ve ever known ’em to have words. Very high class, they is. If ’e were my business, I’d’ve set about him with a rolling pin for some of his lackadaisical ways. Lazy. Bone lazy. That’s what ’e is. And manners ain’t everything, though he’s quite the gentleman when ’e speaks to you.”

“Well, I can’t afford to be lazy, so I’d better get a move on,” said Macdonald, and she nodded.

“That’s as you like. If it’s a matter of his owing you money, I wouldn’t be too hopeful. All these bits and pieces is Miss Grale’s.”

Macdonald laughed to himself as he walked away from the studio. He had met many charwomen in the course of his career, but seldom one so forthright as Mrs. Briggs.

From Camden Town Macdonald made his way to Jermyn Street, where Bruce Rhodian had his chambers. Rhodian was out, but Macdonald was admitted by a dark, lithe fellow, whose accent and tailoring were both noticeably transatlantic. Macdonald gave an official card, and stated quite simply that he wanted to make some inquiries. “Okay,” returned the other. “My name’s Belton—John K. Belton. Come right in. Take a seat. Now what is it you want to know?”

The answers to Macdonald’s carefully phrased questions were promptly given. Rhodian had arrived at his chambers on the Wednesday of the professor’s death at two-thirty in the afternoon. An appointment had been made for him to meet Walter Schofield, of Daumont Films, at three o’clock, the latter having undertaken to come to Rhodian’s rooms to discuss various points with him. Schofield, however, had not turned up, and Rhodian had spent an hour telephoning, trying to run him to earth, eventually finding him at the Elstree Studios. Schofield, in excuse, said that he had mistaken the day on which he had made the appointment.

“Make me see red, these big film guys,” said Belton. “They reckon they own the earth, and no one else has any business to exist. One thing about Rhodian, he never loses his wool. He’d keep his temper in hell. He just

said, well, no matter. Not my fault, and tomorrow's as good as today. We wasted the afternoon at a durned silly show at the Regent Street Plaza, by way of improving our education in film technique. Ever had any dealings with the flick racket?"

"Never," replied Macdonald, and Belton said:

"Lucky for you. They're a lousy crowd. If it weren't that there's money in it, I'd never go near a studio. Still, this Rhodian picture's going to be good stuff. Schofield talked about it for hours, and he reckons it'll be booked by the libraries for months as soon as it's released."

"It seems a pity that Mr. Rhodian won't be there when it's first shown."

"Think so? He doesn't. He'd rather swim a river full of crocodiles than get up in front of a screen and make a speech. Talking about swimming, a durned funny thing happened that Wednesday evening you're talking about. It was a blistering hot day in town—guess you remember, for it was the hottest day we'd had this year—and Rhodian and I thought we'd enjoy a swim. We took a taxi and went out Hampton Court way in the evening, and bathed in the river. We're both useful swimmers—reckon Bruce Rhodian could swim the Channel if he tried—but he nearly finished his promising career that evening. He got cramp, the devil knows why, and if I hadn't been there to paddle him in, he'd have drowned in mid-stream in your funny li'l bit of a river. I tell you I laughed till I nearly drowned myself—Bruce Rhodian drowning in a trickle of water like your historic Thames. He's swum some rivers which could submerge the whole of this city. However, dame fortune didn't mean it quite like that, and I fished him out."

"I've heard of strong swimmers being seized by cramp often enough," said Macdonald. "I believe it's true to say that a strong swimmer is more liable to death by drowning than a man who can't swim at all, because the former takes risks and the latter avoids them."

"Sure. That makes sense to me. Folks with weak hearts outlive great athletes, because the poor crocks spend their lives nursing themselves. Personally I'd as soon pop off and done with it as crawl round half dead."

"I suppose it depends on a man's character; some enjoy taking risks, others enjoy caution," replied Macdonald. "The physiologists would probably say that the character is the product of the glands, and daring depends on the quantities of thyroid and adrenalin available."

Belton chuckled, studying Macdonald through his enormous horn-rimmed glasses.

"I've heard some of that dope handed out by lecturers," he replied. "There's no stock taken in original sin these days, and crime boils down to inadequate endocrine. Seems to me the cops and G-men ought to go round armed with hypodermics and a few bottles and glandular secretions and put society right that way."

"It's not quite so easy as all that, I imagine," replied Macdonald, and the other boomed back in his deep nasal twang.

"No, sir. You've said it. A chemist may regard a man as a complex of chemical compounds, but there's something he can't quite fix in his little test tubes. Hitler's an example. It'd take a darned lot of glandular secretions to turn that guy into a pure hundred per cent altruist."

And Macdonald agreed with him.

Crossing Piccadilly Circus after he had left Jermyn Street, Macdonald met a colleague from his own department—Inspector Jenkins. The latter was a stout, cheerful soul, and during their long association Macdonald and Jenkins had become fast friends.

"Well, chief, how's business?" inquired Jenkins, with a twinkle in his benevolent blue eyes.

"Not too bad. I'm having a pleasant day," replied Macdonald. "The world seems full of amiable people, all willing to oblige. I've met some conversationalists who would have given you real pleasure, including one charlady with latitudinarian views about living in sin, and a liking for a rolling pin as a corrective to laziness in poets, painters and others."

"When it comes to conversation, I'll back you to talk most people out when you get going," said Jenkins. "I always regret I wasn't sent to school in Scotland when I hear your vocabulary. I hear you've got some of our photographic staff on the streets."

"Yes. A good likeness always comes in handy. Any luck in the fingerprint section? I may not have time to drop in again, so walk along with me for a bit."

Jenkins fell into step beside the chief inspector.

“No. Your fingerprints were a washout. Not known in our records. However, I’m persevering. Out for good works this time. Missions to seamen. It’s a grand cause, if you feel like sparing a copper.”

Macdonald laughed, following the cryptic allusion.

“Excellent cause; excellent idea. I’ll subscribe if anything materializes. What about Hatton Garden?”

“All correct. Burmese diamond—I’ve got the weight and technical description. Identical with that sold to Professor Crewdon in December, 1939. Value has appreciated about ten per cent in the interim.”

“Good. For a leisurely looking fellow you get a lot of work done. I’m going on to the University and Archeologists’ Club in Bloomsbury, just as a change from charladies and Jermyn Street.”

“Bracketed?” inquired Jenkins with a twinkle. “I never did like Jermyn Street myself, but it’s not all the novelists make out. I’d give a lot to hear you doing your stuff at this club you’re going to. The conversation ought to be very high hat. Not that I want to join in. I expect I shall fetch up in Wapping or Rotherhithe this evening.”

“Good luck to you. I shall catch the five-thirty from Paddington to Enster if I can. I’ll put through a call to C.O. some time during the night.”

“Good oh, as the diggers say. I’ll remember to ask you for that subscription later.”

Macdonald made his way to the club he had mentioned to Jenkins; it was close to the British Museum extension, a dark, lofty building whose windows had all been blown out months ago, so that the facade had a blind appearance. He inquired for Professor Watlington and after a few minutes was led up to a dreary little room at the back of the building, where a pane of “window-lite” allowed a melancholy light to enter the melancholy room. Dr. Watlington—whose erudition and acquirements Macdonald had learned from a reference book—was a tall, bald-headed man of sixty, sparely built, vigorous looking, and altogether younger looking than Macdonald had expected.

“Chief Inspector Macdonald? I’m very interested to meet you. I heard of you from Dr. Surray, and I think Matheson met you when he gave expert evidence in that Ealing case. I was sorry to hear about Crewdon’s death. He was a charming fellow, a great friend of mine, and one of the most widely

informed men in this club—and that is saying a good deal, you know. We run to information here, as other clubs run to famous names or a celebrated cellar.”

“So I supposed, sir,” replied Macdonald. “I expect that you know the actual facts about Professor Crewdon’s death. Would you give me your opinion on this point—is there any likelihood that he could have been unacquainted with the fact that burning charcoal gives off carbon monoxide?”

“None whatever. Crewdon knew all about charcoal and carbon monoxide. His subject, as you know, was anthropology, but he knew considerably more than the rudiments of natural science. He could hold his own in a discussion with the bio-chemists—the subject interested him. You can dismiss any idea that his death was caused either by ignorance of the by-products of burning charcoal, or by carelessness in dealing with it. Either explanation is equally erroneous.”

“Do you think that suicide could be considered as a reasonable explanation?” asked Macdonald, but the other shook his bald head vigorously.

“I do not. Crewdon was a very happy and contented man. He had a young mind, in the sense that his intelligence was still as vigorous as ever, his curiosity unabated. No man who is as interested as Crewdon was in the problems of life and living would ever commit suicide. Why should he? Crewdon sometimes reminded me of Browning’s Grammarian in his avidity for learning. ‘Before living, he’d learn how to live, no end to learning.’ If he had a regret in the world, it was that he could not hope to live long enough to see the results of certain research which is being carried on now.”

“Then, having dismissed accident and suicide as possible causes of death, there remains one explanation only—murder.”

“Yes, Chief Inspector. I am afraid that you are right, though it is incredible to me that any man should have wished to murder him. I would more easily believe that he was killed by mistake, the murderer mistaking his victim.”

“I can’t state that that is an impossibility, sir, but I do consider it mightily improbable. The only person ever known to have slept in the cave was the professor, and the method used presupposed the presence of the victim in the cave for some time, also the fact that the victim should sleep there. To

the best of my belief, had the professor not slept, he would have discovered what was being planned. However, I should not be justified in taking up your time with my own suppositions. I am here to ask your help.”

Dr. Watlington smiled. “Very correct, Chief Inspector, but very disappointing for me. Every man jack of us is interested in detection, and an exposition of your views would be of great interest to me. However, in what way can I help you?”

“First, do you know anything about Mr. Roland Keston?”

“Keston? I know him, of course; have known him for years. He is an able and conscientious worker, but lacking in originality. He worked well under direction, but has not the initiative to plan out original work. I have always been rather sorry for Keston, as was Crewdon himself. Keston is one of the world’s lonely fellows.”

“I wish you would tell me as much as you can about him.”

“I had my information from Crewdon, of course. He has known Keston since he was a boy. He was the only son of a small London tradesman. He won scholarships by his sheer ability, and went from the City Scrivener’s School to Oxford, maintaining himself on scholarships and exhibitions—a typical poor scholar, industrious and conscientious. He took a second class Arts degree, and then from 1914 to 1918 was in the infantry. He was gassed, and suffered from shell shock and was in hospital for a very long period. I think there was also some melancholy story of a fiancée who jilted him to marry another man. Keston had a librarian’s job in a provincial city for some years, until about 1928 or 1930, I think, when Crewdon came across him, and remembered him from Oxford days. Thereafter Crewdon employed him, and found him a valuable and conscientious collaborator. The only other thing that I know about Keston is that he has no relations in the world, or none that he knows of. He is devoted to Crewdon, and devoted also, I believe, to Mrs. Merrion.”

Dr. Watlington ceased speaking and studied Macdonald’s face with alert, interested eyes.

“It is not my province to ask questions, Chief Inspector, but it is natural to assume that there is a reason behind your inquiry concerning Keston. Inevitably you must suspect all those in contact with your case. I can only give you my opinion that I am convinced that Keston had no hand in this infamous crime. Natural affection, gratitude and self-interest would all have

led him to hope that Crewdon would continue to live, and continue to employ him for many years. Now, on Crewdon's death, Keston becomes unemployed, and his talents are not easily marketable. He loses a comfortable home, a considerate employer, a kindly friend and congenial work at one stroke."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes. I had realized all those points, sir. The fact that I make detailed inquiries concerning everybody who was at Valehead at the time of the professor's death does not of necessity mean that I suspect them all. Such facts have to be tabulated in all these cases. It is also customary to find out as accurately as possible where all contacts were at a given time. In Mr. Keston's case this is not possible. He was out for several hours on the night of the professor's death, searching for someone who was benighted in a mist on the moors."

"For whom was he searching?"

"A man named Lockersley, a guest of Mrs. Merrion's."

"Ah. David Lockersley. One of our modern poets."

Macdonald smiled and then went on, "Another point on which you could help me, sir. The professor came to London to deliver a lecture. He was also, I understand, anxious to see an old friend, Professor Evans."

"Certainly. They both stayed here in his club. Evans and Crewdon were lifelong friends."

"Did you see anything of them while they were here?"

"I passed the time of day with both, though I did not have any long conversation with them."

"I am interested in this point, sir. The professor had said that he was returning to Valehead on the Thursday, and he had made all arrangements to that effect, such as reserving his room here; apparently he altered his arrangements quite suddenly, and decided to go back to Valehead on the Wednesday, though from what I can gather about him it was unlike him hurriedly to alter previously made arrangements. I can get hold of no reason which caused him to change his plans. I wondered if any of his friends here, or Professor Evans, could throw any light on the matter."

"I cannot help you myself, Chief Inspector, but I can add an iota of information. Crewdon was to have dined with Barnes on the Wednesday evening. Barnes is a Cambridge man, an archeologist who has done some

excavations in Peru. I know Barnes was very anxious to see Crewdon and considerably put out when the latter telephoned to say that urgent business was taking him back to Devon. The nature of that business Crewdon did not divulge in his call to Barnes.”

“Perhaps we have hit on the crux of the matter, sir,” said Macdonald. “I wonder if you can help me to get the facts more exact. Professor Crewdon came up to town on the Wednesday preceding his death—”

“Yes, and he saw Barnes on the Thursday evening. That I know, for I was in the entrance hall when they met. Barnes was just going back to Cambridge, but he was returning to London on the following Wednesday morning, and he asked Crewdon to dine with him on the Wednesday evening. On the evening before their appointment, on the Tuesday, Crewdon ran up to say that he was very sorry that he must defer their meeting, as he had to return to Valehead immediately.”

“That is a very interesting point, sir. Everyone who knew Professor Crewdon has stressed that he was the most courteous and considerate of men—”

“So he was. So he was. Crewdon was punctilious to a degree, the last man to break an appointment without due reason,” exclaimed Watlington.

Macdonald continued, “Had the professor known earlier that he would not be in town on the Wednesday, he would have let Mr. Barnes know at once. Surely it seems as though something must have happened on the Tuesday evening which caused him to alter his plans.”

“Very sound, Chief Inspector. I think your argument a good one. On the Tuesday evening Crewdon dined here with Evans. A pity, a pity . . . Evans has left for the States. He might have enlightened you on this matter.”

“Can you help me to get into touch with Professor Evans, sir? I could cable him and arrange for a conversation on the transatlantic telephone.”

“Cable to his club in New York. I can give you that address. The club will know Evans’ whereabouts. It is a possibility, Chief Inspector. A distinct possibility.”

When Macdonald had left the club, Professor Watlington went back to the vast, rather gloomy looking reading room. Only one member was in that room at the moment, and he was apparently fast asleep, sitting bolt upright

in one of the black leather armchairs which had been designed for larger men than the present occupant. He was a thin, stringy little man, with a bald head like a dome and a prominent Adam's apple. Watlington walked vigorously across the room.

"Hi, James! Wake up!"

"I am not asleep," replied the other in tones of reproof. "I was meditating. I might remind you that members are requested to be silent in this room."

"That be damned," said Watlington cheerfully. "As for your meditations, they were not concerned with either the molecule of the chromosome or the P.H.-ness of meristemmatic tissues. You were meditating on the subject of murder, James."

Dr. James Abingdon opened his mild blue eyes and leaned forward.

"What did he say, Ernest?" he inquired eagerly, and Watlington chuckled.

"Ah! Panting for inside information, James. Not that this C.I.D. bloke told me anything very much. Now I come to think of it he made me do most of the talking."

"I think it probable that no great compulsion was needed, Ernest," replied Dr. Abingdon. "You are growing steadily more garrulous with every year that passes. But come, the chief inspector *must* have said something."

"I have been studying his method, James. In detection, all you have to do is to ask questions, holding out an implied hope that a reward will follow in the shape of information. I propose to follow this method. When Crewdon dined with Evans on Tuesday evening, *you* sat at the next table, James."

"Yes, but I was reading," replied the other.

"So you may have been, but I have never yet met a man more capable of absorbing what goes on around him in spite of a book," replied Watlington. "Think it out, James. . . . Either you overheard a few words of Crewdon's conversation, or else I'm going straight to Aberystwyth to find Morgan Flloyd. He sat at the table on the other side of Crewdon."

"No, no, don't do that," protested Dr. Abingdon earnestly. "Morgan Flloyd is a *very* unreliable witness, a hundred per cent Celt. They embroider, Ernest, they embroider."

“Maybe they do, but I would rather have embroidery than nothing. I’ll just get a Bradshaw. The chief inspector thinks that that conversation between Crewdon and Evans may have been of the first importance.”

“He is mistaken,” snapped Dr. Abingdon, his blue eyes positively fierce. “I tell you that modern poetry is of no importance whatever. It is a decadent and bastard offspring of impotence and perversity.”

“Apply that to a modern poet in person and it is either slanderous or a *reductio ad absurdum*, or both,” responded Watlington. “Besides, it is you who are mistaken, James. Have you forgotten that a modern poet was one of those who was staying at Valehead when Crewdon was murdered?”

“I have forgotten nothing, Ernest, but I tell you this. If Crewdon had murdered the poet in question, the case would have been comprehensible. I understand that one poem deals solely with the topic of lice, and that it contains no verb, no punctuation and no capital letter.”

“Excellent. I must read it. If those poems are not in this library I’ll have a word with the committee. When did the poetry motif occur, James? With the soup?”

“Certainly not. With the tripe,” replied Dr. Abingdon.

“Tripe . . . a very valuable form of nutriment—followed by stewed figs and custard, and/or government cheese,” replied Watlington sadly. “Do you remember those Strasbourg steaks, James?”

“Figs . . . figs,” murmured Dr. Abingdon. “Figs and college groups. . . . Now what college was it? Evans took his Ph.D. at Heidelberg, and Crewdon was at Emmanuel.”

“About forty years ago,” said Watlington. “Do you mean to tell me that Evans and Crewdon were exchanging college photographs?”

“Something of the kind. I missed part of their conversation. Those figs —”

“Yes, yes. The very devil,” agreed Watlington, “but don’t tell me you left the table without acquiring any further information.”

“I heard Crewdon say, ‘This must be elucidated immediately,’” replied Dr. Abingdon. “I thought that he referred to the figs.”

“You disappoint me, James. I shall go to Aberystwyth immediately.”

“Why not telephone?” inquired Dr. Abingdon. “It might save you a fruitless journey.”

“A good idea,” replied Watlington. “What’s his number?”

“Ha! That I *do* know,” replied Dr. Abingdon, “and I do not propose to divulge it until you have given me a succinct account of the chief inspector’s conversation—verbatim, Ernest, verbatim.”

“May I remind you that there is a rule demanding silence in this room?” put in an acid voice from the door.

Dr. Watlington got to his feet.

“The Linneas room, Ernest. That will be best,” he said. “Let us sing of lice, with a pinch of spice, in accents nice, with a voice of vice. . . .”

The last comer shook his head as two learned men left the reading room.

“This club is *going down*,” he said.

MACDONALD put in some concentrated work before he left London again. He interviewed the club employees in the office, endeavoring to find out if any letter or telephone call had arrived for the professor on the Tuesday before he left. It emerged that Crewdon had been out nearly all Tuesday, and had not returned to the club until six o'clock in the evening. He had then had a few words with the secretary, but no one could recollect any letter or phone message coming for him. Professor Evans had come in at seven-thirty and the two men had dined together. At nine o'clock Crewdon had come to the office and asked for two trunk calls to be put through for him, one to Valehead, one to Cambridge. He had also left a message for the accounts department, saying that he would be leaving the club next day and asking for his bill to be made out ready for him first thing in the morning. He had left the club at nine-thirty on the Wednesday morning, taking his small suitcase with him. As to what he had done on the Wednesday morning, no one knew—he had not left London until the one-thirty train from Paddington.

Macdonald felt more than disposed to stay in London to continue his researches, but something urged him to get back to Valehead. It was one of those not quite rational "hunches" which a detective sometimes gives way to—a feeling that he must be at a certain place at a certain time.

The chief inspector had plenty of time to ponder over his case in the train. It was nominally five-thirty when the train left Paddington, actually three-thirty G.M.T. and the hottest part of the afternoon. Macdonald had only just caught the train, and it was a very full train. He wedged himself in the corridor, close by an open window, and promptly forgot all about his own whereabouts and the heat of the train as he pondered over his problem.

Again, Mrs. Merrion's statement, "Everything was quite ordinary until Tuesday evening," recurred to him. That seemed to hold good of Professor Crewdon, too. He had come into the club and chatted to the secretary at six o'clock without mentioning that he proposed to leave the next morning, or asking for his bill, or mentioning that he wanted trunk calls put through. It seemed as though between six o'clock and nine o'clock something had happened which had caused him to make a decision to return to Valehead, and yet when he had arrived there he had given no reason for a change of plan which must have been dictated by some definite happening. Macdonald pondered over the oddness of the whole thing. The professor must have been making his decision to return to Valehead about the same time that Lockersley and Rhodian and Keston were in the cave, not very long after Emmeline Stamford had arrived at Valehead. A great deal seemed to depend on the factor which had caused the professor to leave London and return to Valehead—and concerning that factor Macdonald could only guess. True, he could hazard an answer—more than one answer, that was the difficulty. The existence of what Macdonald called "those infernal diamonds" complicated matters considerably.

It was after nine o'clock when the chief inspector arrived at Enster, and the evening was cooling to a glory of gold and lengthening shadows. Macdonald found his car, and turned onto the Valehead road wondering if all the instructions he had given were being satisfactorily carried out. He had not waited in town to write out all the cables he wanted sent off; had he done so he could not have caught his train to Devonshire, and he knew that he could get a priority call and telephone through his instructions from the Valehead police headquarters. He drove through the radiant evening still thinking hard.

Inspector Turner was waiting for him at the constabulary, looking somewhat sardonic.

"Good evening. Glad to see you back. They've been having a dust-up at Valehead. Perhaps you'd like to go and cope with it. I was going myself, but since you're back. . . ."

"Yes, I'll go. What's the trouble?"

"Dr. Dark rang up. Luckily he's got a bit of sense. Lockersley's been knocked out. Concussion—but Dark says he was laid up with a neat one on

the point, and hit his head when he fell.”

“I see. I’ll go straight up there. When did this happen?”

“About nine this evening,” Turner explained.

Macdonald got back into his car and drove along the narrow lanes through the fragrant evening. His car seemed to enter a tunnel of gloom as he entered the Valehead drive and the beech trees closed over him, but when he crossed the little bridge he saw the white house on the plateau above him reflecting back the lucid evening light, serene and beautiful.

Mrs. Merrion was at the front door to meet him as soon as he had alighted from his car.

“You must think us one vast nuisance,” she said sadly. “Poor Valehead! It seems like a lunatic asylum—and look at it, of all places the most serene.”

She had strolled across the drive to meet him, and again Macdonald was struck with her air of gracious calm. Though her eyes were troubled, Eve Merrion yet retained a measure of calm dignity which seemed to accord with the house. Beautiful she was not, smart she was not, but she had some quality which was as lovable as the still evening light which irradiated the quiet air.

“What happened?” Macdonald asked quite simply.

“We were having dinner late—supper, more accurately,” she said. “I wanted to be out in the garden as long as I could, and now my sister is not here and Mr. Rhodian has gone, I thought it would be rather a relief not to have a formal meal this evening. I said we would have a cold supper about half past eight, and David Lockersley said he would like that, too. I went in at eight o’clock and washed the mud off, and came down to the dining room about half past. Mr. Lockersley wasn’t there; I didn’t bother, he’s never a punctual person. I waited until nearly nine, and then I suddenly got worried. I suppose it was the result of all these distresses and uncertainties, for I never worry about people being late as a rule. I called Carter, and we went up to Lockersley’s room. He was there, lying on the floor. I thought he was dead. . . . He wasn’t dead. He had fallen, and must have knocked his head on the corner of the wash basin as he fell. I rang up Dr. Dark, and he came straight up here and bandaged Lockersley. It’s concussion. He’s still unconscious. Dr. Dark told me he would ring up the police, as it seemed

difficult to see how such an accident happened. He is also sending a nurse. Mrs. Carter is with Mr. Lockersley until the nurse comes.”

As she talked they strolled slowly along the level space in front of the house, Macdonald with his hands thrust in his pockets, his head bent a little as he listened. When she ceased speaking he said:

“Will you tell me when you last saw Mr. Lockersley, and where the other occupants of the house were, so far as you know?”

“I spoke to him last at tea time. We had tea out here, on the terrace, about five o’clock. We didn’t talk very much; it had been a peaceful day. I have been in the garden nearly all day. I told the Carters they could go out, or do as they liked, from lunch time onwards. Mrs. Carter left the tea things ready, and a cold supper, and Brady was to do anything else necessary. I think the Carters were both out until nearly nine o’clock—Carter had just come in when I went to look for David Lockersley. Mr. Keston was in his own room. Brady took him supper on a tray at eight o’clock. As I said, I was in the garden until after eight o’clock.”

“You say that you *spoke* to Mr. Lockersley last at tea time. Did you see him after that?”

“Yes. He sat and read on the lawns there for about an hour, and then he strolled off in the direction of the drive. That would have been about half past six. I didn’t see him again.”

“Did you hear any sound in the house after you came in? A man of Lockersley’s size makes a considerable noise as he falls.”

“No, I didn’t hear anything at all. The house was absolutely quiet. I had a bath when I came in, and I shouldn’t have heard anything while the bath water was running. One never does.”

“No. That’s true. Did you ask Mr. Keston if he heard anything?”

“He didn’t, but then his part of the house is right away from the part where Mr. Lockersley’s room is. The Bradys heard nothing, either.”

“I think I had better go up and see Mr. Lockersley’s room. He is in bed there?”

“Yes. Carter got him to bed.”

“I shan’t want to ask questions while I am in the room, because quiet is essential for a man with a head injury, so will you tell me how he was lying

when you found him?"

"He was lying on his back just near the wash basin. It is a fixed one, with running water, and it has rather projecting corners. The door of his wardrobe was open, as though he had just gone to it. His feet were near the wardrobe, his head near the wash basin. It looked to me as though he had slipped on the rug in front of the wardrobe, it was all rucked up. There is a polished parquet floor in that room; it is rather slippery."

"I'll go up and look at it. The room is the one on the extreme right of the landing, at the end, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'll show you," Eve Merrion volunteered.

"I can find it. Just one other thing. I'm not sure how long I shall be here this evening, but I think it would be better if I left a man stationed in the house. I don't like you to be alone just now."

Eve Merrion's eyes darkened with distress.

"But I'm not alone. The Carters are here, and the Bradys, and Mr. Keston."

"You needn't bother about my man. He's very quiet, and you may not even see him, but I want him to be here."

She gave the least shrug of her shoulders, a little weary movement.

"Then it is useless for me to protest, Chief Inspector."

They turned toward the house, and Macdonald left her standing in the hall, while he himself ran quietly up the wide stairway.

In Lockersley's room the light was dim, for the curtains were half drawn across the long windows, shutting out the pale, still radiant sky. Mrs. Carter was sitting by the bed, and Macdonald could tell that she had been crying. Lockersley, with pallid face and bandaged head, lay like one dead, save for his slow, heavy breathing. As Macdonald came into the room Mrs. Carter raised a finger to her lips in a gesture asking for silence, and he nodded, and came and stood at the foot of the bed and looked down at the unconscious man. Macdonald could see the swelling and discoloration of the upturned chin, just where a shrewd and expert hitter would strike for a knockout.

Still standing by the bed, he looked around the room, noting the position of the wardrobe and washing basin, and the rug on the polished floor, just as Mrs. Merrion had described them. He moved softly across the room and

tested the rug with his feet. It gave a little as he shuffled, but the rug was fairly heavy and did not slip as a thinner mat would have done. There was an electric stove standing in the fireplace, a small portable thing; Macdonald had noticed that there were similar stoves in most of the bedrooms at Valehead, though when he had been around the house before he had not seen a stove in Lockersley's room.

As he stood, considering the distances between door, wardrobe and wash basin, the door opened and Mrs. Merrion came in, followed by a young woman in nurse's uniform. Mrs. Merrion whispered to Mrs. Carter, and the latter got up and nodded to the nurse before she left the room with Mrs. Merrion. The nurse ignored Macdonald, opened the attache case she carried and arranged some small properties on the bedside table—a thermometer, a flat traveling clock and an electric torch. She then stood beside Lockersley for a moment, her fingers on his wrist.

Macdonald picked up the little electric stove and said quietly, "I'll have another one sent in. I think this may be faulty."

She nodded and sat down in the chair by the bed, ignoring him completely—a very well trained young nurse, Macdonald considered, not given to showing any curiosity about matters outside her province. Lockersley's rucksack lay in a corner of the room, and Macdonald picked it up. As soon as he was outside the bedroom door he put the little stove in the rucksack and carried it downstairs with him. Mrs. Merrion was talking to Mrs. Carter in the hall, and Macdonald passed through toward the kitchen quarters. Keston appeared from the direction of his own rooms as Macdonald opened the door leading to the kitchens.

"Can I speak to you a moment?" Keston asked, his voice nervous and tense.

"A little later on. I will come to your rooms," said Macdonald, and Keston gave a shrug and threw up his hands like a man in despair.

Macdonald went on into the kitchen, where he found Carter, a teapot in his hand, standing by the stove, where a kettle was beginning to hum.

Macdonald put down the rucksack and closed the door behind him, advancing across the big, stone-floored room. The windows had been already blacked out, and a glaring electric light hung above Carter's head.

“Good evening, sir. They say trouble brews trouble, and a cup of tea never comes amiss.”

“Quite true. Put down that teapot, Carter, and switch the kettle off.”

The man stared as Macdonald spoke in his quiet, resolute voice, but did exactly as he was bid, as though hypnotized by the authority of that deliberate voice.

“Now hold out your hand, your right hand, knuckles up.”

A red flush came over Carter’s face, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Macdonald said crisply, “No use arguing, Carter. Do as you’re told.”

The man held out his right hand as Macdonald had bidden him, a big, beefy fist. Under the strong light the bruised knuckles showed up plainly.

“Not in such good condition as you once were, Carter. Going soft. Still, you’re the only person in this house who could have knocked Mr. Lockersley out in one.”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Oh, yes, you do, Carter. You understand quite as clearly as I do, and that is very clearly indeed. You were standing by the wardrobe when Mr. Lockersley came in quietly and found you. You did the first thing that came into your head—a silly thing, too. You knocked him out, and as he fell he hit his head on the wash basin. You were frightened then; you came away and left him.”

Carter’s face was purple now, and Macdonald watched him, very alert, but the big man slumped down into a chair.

“You’re wrong, sir, indeed you’re wrong. It’s true I hit him, but it was in self-defense.”

“Maybe. You knew you were bowled out.”

“No, sir. I may have done wrong, but I was puzzled in my mind. This business has got me fairly moithered. I was in the hall when Mr. Lockersley came in from the garden before dinner, and I saw him go towards the professor’s rooms. I was a bit surprised, because he hadn’t been speaking to Mr. Keston during the day, and somehow I didn’t think he wanted to speak to him. I hung about a bit, because I was afraid there might be a row if he and Mr. Keston met, and I didn’t want the mistress to have any more bother. Mr. Keston was having his dinner, I knew that, but Mr. Lockersley didn’t go

into the dining room. I don't know where he went, but he was very quiet. He came back after a few minutes, softly like, and went upstairs to his room. I went up after him—I've been valeting him, and I hadn't put his dinner jacket and that out. I opened his door, and he was standing by the wardrobe—it was open—and he was looking at something he was holding in his hand—small stones, or something of that kind. He turned round with a jump when he saw me, and then he suddenly went raging mad and said, 'What the hell do you think you're doing, spying on me?' I was taken aback, and said right out, 'What were *you* doing in the professor's room just now?' and before I knew another thing he was going for me with his fists. It was all so quick I didn't have no time to think. I countered and hit back instinctive like, and he just went down backwards and hit his head against the wash basin, as you said. I think he slipped on the rug as it shifted under him."

"I'm interested to hear your version, Carter. So you left him lying on the floor, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I thought he'd just come to, as a man does after a knockout, and not be much the worse. I was worried to death. I didn't want to go to Madam and tell her what happened. If I'd told her about Lockersley snooping round in the professor's rooms, I don't think she'd have believed me. I thought I'd wait until I could tell *you*, all straight and shipshape, and then I lost my nerve. I knew I'd no proof of what happened, and I realized it looked bad, my leaving him like that and saying nothing."

"Not too good, certainly. It'll look worse if he dies, Carter. And what happened to the 'stones' he was holding in his hand?"

"I don't know, sir. They must be on the floor somewhere, up in his room. I didn't touch them. Fact is, I was so worried I didn't think anything about them."

"Then they'll be there now. It's a thin story, Carter. Now you told me the other day you had been a sailor—I want to see your discharge papers."

"They're lost, sir. Me and my missis, we had a room in Camberwell where we kept some of our stuff, boxes, and a bit of furniture or so. They've all gone west in the blitz. Bombed flat. Lavender Terrace, Camberwell. Just wiped out it was, in November, 1940."

"It would have been. Even blitzes have their uses. Still, I expect someone may remember you. That elephant you've got tattooed on your

arm is a striking bit of work. Now listen to me, Carter. You may have been telling me the truth, or you may not, but you can go up to your own room and you can stay there, for tonight at any rate. Don't try to clear out, or any other funny stuff, because it won't be a success. I'll see you again in the morning."

Macdonald saw to it that Carter went up to his room, and that Reeves was on the alert in the house. Just as he was leaving the kitchen quarters with the rucksack, Macdonald saw Mrs. Carter, her face flushed with crying, and he stopped to speak to her, gently enough.

"I'm sorry there's all this trouble for you, Mrs. Carter. I've told your man he's got to stay upstairs in his room. You can go to him, but I advise you both to stay up there together. I shall want to see him again in the morning."

"Oh, sir, I know he meant no harm. He just hit out without thinking when the young gentleman went for him. He's quick-tempered is Carter. Where he did wrong was in leaving him lying there. If he'd only have told me, I'd've made him see sense and look after the young gentleman. Carter didn't realize he was really badly hurt."

"It's no use worrying about that now, Mrs. Carter. You go up to him and persuade him that his wisest course is to tell the plain, unvarnished truth. Inventing stories won't help him, or you either."

Macdonald went out through the hall toward his car and saw Eve Merrion sitting on the porch, just beside the front door. "If anybody wants me, I'm here," she said. "Somehow life doesn't seem quite so awful out of doors. The sky helps. Do you ever read detective stories, Chief Inspector?"

"Quite often. I'm afraid the entertainment I derive from them is not quite what the author intends."

"I feel as though I'm in the middle of a rather bad detective novel, the sort of thing one might dream. Perhaps I shall wake up and find it just isn't true."

Macdonald changed his mind about going to his car and went back to the kitchen. He took the electric stove out of the rucksack and tested the two point fixture at the end of the cord for fingerprints. It was wiped clean, and he got no result. He then unscrewed the fitting and examined the ends of the wire. They had been recently cut, and were still bright and shining. The

cord measured nearly two yards—an unusually long one. Looking around the kitchen, he found an electric iron with an adapter at one end which fitted the sockets of the electric lights. He removed the adapter and fitted it to the stove cord, and then connected this up to the pendant in place of the bulb. The stove glowed as soon as the switch was put down.

Replacing the adapter on the iron, and the bulb in the pendant, Macdonald put the stove back in the rucksack and took it out to his car. He reflected that when he had first glanced through the bedrooms at Valehead, there had been no electric stove in Lockersley's room.

Mrs. Merrion was still sitting on the porch, and Macdonald said to her:

"Why not go indoors and go to bed? You won't be feeling your best tomorrow if you sit up all night."

"And you think that I shall be needing to feel my best tomorrow?"

"I think you will feel better able to cope with 'the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to' if you have a night's sleep. I don't think there will be any further agitations tonight."

"But there may be tomorrow. Won't you tell me what poor Carter has done?"

"Poor Carter knocked out Mr. Lockersley. I can't tell you why, but the fact remains that he did."

"Do you think that there's something about this place that drives people crazy?"

"No. I don't think so. It's not fair to blame the place."

Eve laughed quite suddenly in the half-dark. "I'm glad to hear you say that, because I love the place so much."

"It's not fair to blame the place for the behavior of humanity. Blame the times we live in, if you will. Abnormality has become the norm, and the caveman is nearer the surface than in peace time, perhaps. My present advice to you is, go to bed and sleep as well as you can."

Eve got up from her seat and preceded him into the shadowy hall. Macdonald went on:

"I'm going to black out here, in case we need to light the hall and stairway. I'll see to it, so you needn't bother. I should go and see if the nurse needs anything before you go to bed."

“Oh, she wants a pot of tea at midnight and a meal in the small hours. I’ve arranged about all that. What about you? The tea-making apparatus is all to hand in the kitchen, and there’s food in the larder, unless you’d like to share nurse’s tray and enlighten her unnatural dinner time with stories of stratagems and spoils. Sorry if I sound intolerably foolish. It’s a defense mechanism against weeping like Niobe.”

“You don’t sound foolish, at all,” replied Macdonald. “I won’t share nurse’s tray, though. She looked a healthy young woman with a good appetite. If I’m overcome by hunger during the night I will raid the larder, as you suggest. More probably I shall go to sleep, as I advise you to do.”

“Thank you. Good night. For heaven’s sake let there be no more accidents before the morn’s morn.”



12

WHEN Eve Merrion had gone upstairs, Macdonald turned in the direction of Keston's rooms. The passages beyond the dividing door had been blacked out, and he used his flashlight to light the way. Just as he reached the door of the professor's study, he heard Keston's voice on the stairs above him.

"Who's there?"

"Macdonald. I want to talk to you. Shall I come upstairs, or would you prefer to come into the study?"

"Will you come up, please? The study door is locked. Mr. Layton locked it after he had been working in there."

Macdonald went up the stairway—it was a small flight which had connection with the one-time nurseries of Valehead House. Keston, fully dressed, was standing by the door of his bedroom, silhouetted against the light. He held the door open for Macdonald to come in and then closed it behind him.

"What does this last development mean?" he inquired.

Macdonald glanced at the strained face and tired eyes of the man who spoke. Keston, always somewhat frail and nervous looking, had the appearance of an utterly exhausted man.

"Sit down. You look tired out," said Macdonald. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his pipe and began to fill it. "I wish you'd tell me one thing," he said, speaking quite placidly. "What was in your mind when you asked me to search Lockersley last night? What did you expect me to find on him?"

Keston's thin face flushed a dull, painful red, and he fiddled nervously with his glasses.

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you,” he almost stuttered in his uncertainty. “I have been very much upset over this ghastly tragedy, and I have had a conviction—a deep conviction—that Lockersley is at the bottom of it. I can’t tell you exactly why. It is irrational, perhaps—strong convictions often are—but it is very real to me. I followed Lockersley down the drive last night; when he set out for the cave I believed that I was on the track of something, that I should discover something essential. I saw him go into the cave, and when I followed him I was strung up—excited, I suppose. Then, when you appeared, or rather when you turned your torchlight on, it was a shock, a sort of anticlimax. I had made a considerable effort to brace myself to go into that foul cave. . . . I don’t know if you will understand me; the place has tragic recollections for me, and I have a sort of horror of it. Nevertheless, I followed Lockersley in, and when you turned your light on, I saw him lying on that slab. I think I lost control of myself, or became momentarily unreasonable. I remember saying to you, ‘Search him,’ because it seemed to me, then, that he *must* have some incriminating evidence on him. ‘Why had he come there?’—that was the question I kept on asking myself. I know now that I spoke unreasonably. I have no other explanation to offer.”

“It may interest you to know that Lockersley himself repeated your suggestion that I should search him,” said Macdonald. “He wanted to know what you expected me to find, or so he said. Anyway, I took the suggestion; I did search him, in the cave, a few minutes after you had gone.”

Keston sat limply, a study of dejection.

“And you found nothing?”

“I found an uncut diamond in one of the pockets of his dinner jacket. I have had evidence today that it was one of the diamonds which Professor Crewdon purchased in Hatton Garden.”

Keston’s limpness left him, and he sat up excitedly.

“Then it was he who took the diamonds! I was right after all! I was always convinced that the man was a scoundrel. This proves it!”

“Does it?” asked Macdonald. “Assuming that yours is the case for the prosecution, I think that counsel for the defense would have a good deal to say. Would Lockersley have invited me to search him had he known that a stolen diamond, belonging to this murdered man, was in his pocket? Would he have come to the cave, knowing that I was to meet him there, with such

evidence upon him? Even at the last moment he could have disposed of that evidence. A small stone can easily be thrown away in the dark.”

“Then what explanation do you give?” demanded Keston excitedly. “Are you assuming that he did *not* know the stone was in his pocket?”

“It is not for me to assume anything at the moment. My occupation is to inquire, but I can tell you the assumption which counsel for the defense would put forward. He would make the most of the fact that *you* repeatedly asked me to search Lockersley, as though you were certain that incriminating evidence would be found on him.”

Keston stiffened in his chair, his chin coming up with a jerk.

“You are accusing *me* of this thing?” he demanded furiously.

“No. As I told you just now, my business is to inquire, but I might remind you that a man quick to accuse another is not in a strong position to resent suspicion of himself. Your trouble is, or so it seems to me, that you are unable to bring your reason to bear on this case. Your mind is so fogged by prejudice and assumption that your reasoning powers are blacked out. Now say if you apply your mind to the matter for a change, and leave your opinions and feelings out of it. First, have you any substantial evidence in support of your belief that Lockersley is a murderer?”

Keston’s face worked painfully. “He was out on the night of the murder,” he said slowly. “That gives opportunity. He knew that Professor Crewdon was returning home, and knew of his habit of sleeping in the cave. In addition Mrs. Merrion had said that her father was sure to sleep there on his first night at home. As to motive—he was—is—devoted to Mrs. Merrion, and he knew that the professor . . . would not countenance his—er—attachment.”

“The motive is meaningless, as Mrs. Merrion was independent of her father, and had no reason to take his advice against her own inclinations. Let us leave that point for the moment, and return to the business of the diamonds. You said that you did not know where the professor kept them.”

“That is true,” said Keston earnestly. “I had not, and have not, any idea. The subject did not interest me. I never gave it a thought. Indeed, I had not thought of the matter since the day the professor discussed it with me until you asked me about his financial affairs.”

“Then think of it now. Did you ever tidy the professor’s desk? Had you any idea what he kept in the various drawers? Had you ever been to the desk for any reason at all?”

“Certainly I had, to fetch or to put away papers, to renew stationery and ink and so forth, but I do not believe the diamonds were there. If they were, I never saw them, and knowing his habit of orderliness, I do not think that he would have put such objects in a desk kept for writing materials. I think it far more likely that he would have kept them in his bedroom, among cuff links and a few coins which he valued.”

“Presumably the Bradys cleaned his room and valeted him, and so forth. Do you think it likely that they knew of the existence of the diamonds?”

“I don’t know—but the professor, like myself, was convinced of the Bradys’ honesty.”

“Since you have been here at Valehead, has Carter ever had reason to go into the professor’s rooms?”

“He has been in and out fixing electric lights, hand lamps and so forth, and doing jobs such as mending window sashes.”

“Have you ever seen Mr. Lockersley in this part of the house?”

“He was over the entire house, including this part, shortly after he arrived. I have never seen him here since.”

“Carter told me this evening that when Mr. Lockersley came indoors after supper he came to this part of the house, while you were having dinner. Did you hear or see him?”

“No. I had no idea he was here. Carter did not tell me about it.”

“When did you last see Mr. Lockersley today?”

“I saw him soon after six o’clock. He was going down the drive toward the cave. Later I think he used the telephone. We have only one line in this house, and there is an extension in this part. We can tell when the main is in use by a small white panel which drops when the main receiver is off and, of course, there can be no listening in. Mrs. Merrion was in the garden, and the Carters were in their own quarters. It must have been Lockersley phoning.”

“I see. Well, I have kept you a long time, Mr. Keston. You had better get to bed now, which is another way of suggesting that you don’t wander about

the house or out in the grounds tonight. Besides, you look tired, as though you hadn't slept for a week."

Macdonald's voice was kindly enough, and Keston flushed, as though embarrassed by the very kindness in the C.I.D. man's words.

"It's quite true," he said simply. "I haven't slept. I can't sleep. I go on worrying and worrying about this terrible business. I know you think I have behaved and spoken foolishly. Probably you are right. I have a modicum of sense in my own subject, but somehow I've always made a mess of human contacts. I have been told I am a fool so often, in that respect, that I am accustomed to the verdict."

When Macdonald left Keston, he went into the professor's bedroom. It was a vast room with white paneled walls; the minimum of furniture in it made it look almost stark. A narrow iron bedstead, a compactum cupboard, two chairs and a plain wooden table for toilet articles comprised all the furniture. There was a print on one wall, a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's rather gruesome drawing of a dissector at work. Macdonald had previously been through the compactum and the table drawer. The only thing which interested him in the room now was that upon the shelf above the fixed wash basin there was a packet of Meta fuel, which had not been there last time he was in the room. He lifted this carefully, using his handkerchief to cover it, and carried it downstairs. As he reached the ground floor he heard a movement on the landing upstairs. He locked the packet he was carrying into the briefcase he had left in the hall, and then went upstairs. The light was burning in the passage and he saw the nurse outside Lockersley's room. She looked at him quite imperturbably, and he asked:

"How is your patient?"

"Just the same. Pulse quickening a bit. It does, with concussion. I don't think he's in any danger; he'll probably wake up tomorrow with a vile headache, having forgotten everything that happened before his accident. Of course, one never can tell with concussion. They'll take an X-ray to make sure, but I don't think he's very bad."

"Not what you call interesting."

"Not a bit. Dull from my point of view. I've nothing to do except watch him."

“If I am very quiet, can I come into his room to look for something on the floor?”

“If you’re perfectly quiet, yes. You can’t have a bright light or anything like that.”

“A torch will do, and I’ll keep the beam on the floor.”

The nurse nodded, and Macdonald followed her into the room. A shaded hand lamp stood on the table, leaving the bed in shadow. The nurse’s chair was by the bed. She whispered to Macdonald:

“It’s a bore. I can’t read because the flex of the lamp is so short. I can’t keep an eye on him if I sit over there, and it’s easier to keep awake if you’ve got something to do.”

“I’ll get you another lamp from downstairs,” said Macdonald.

He slipped silently out of the room, ran downstairs and fetched a hand lamp with a long cord from the sitting room and carried it upstairs. Using his torch to help him, he disconnected the lamp of which the nurse complained, lifted the shaded silk from it onto the one he had brought up, and connected it. Then, with the same noiseless efficiency, he lifted a small table and set it within a few feet of the bed, and arranged the shaded light so that its beam did not reach the patient. The nurse smiled her thanks.

“Thank you very much. I hate bothering people, and Mrs. Merrion is so worried,” she whispered.

She sat down, and Macdonald crept softly over the floor, searching it with his flashlight. He found two more uncut diamonds under the wardrobe. He got up and lifted the disused hand lamp and moved with it toward the door. As he opened it he came face to face with Mrs. Merrion. She had a tea tray in her hands.

“First rule for the entertainment of hospital nurses—tea every few hours,” she whispered. “Hard on the ration. What’s the matter with that lamp? Has it fused?”

“No. The flex was too short. I found Nurse another.”

“But all the flexes are the same—good long ones.”

“Are they? Well, she seems better satisfied with the other.”

“Just fussing. They do. So should I if I were a night nurse.”

She took the tray into the bedroom, and Macdonald went to the farther corner of the great main landing, where the service bedrooms were located. Here he found Reeves, sitting on a chair in the dark. Macdonald beckoned to him, keeping his flashlight down, so that only its faint reflection showed himself and his colleague. Reeves came close and whispered:

“Carter and his missis are still arguing. They’ve had a rare old set-to. Couldn’t hear much of it, except that she’s been crying a lot, and keeps on asking, ‘Why ever did you do it?’ He swears at intervals and tells her to shut up. Apart from the nurse coming out to the bathroom and Mrs. Merrion bringing the tea up, everything’s been quiet.”

“Right. Carry on, and keep your ears open, though I don’t expect there’ll be anything to listen to. I don’t think Carter will try to bolt. He knows it isn’t easy these days. I’m going down into that telephone room. I ought to be able to get some reports by this time, and the line will be quiet. You know where the telephone is, just off the hall. I’ll leave the lights on downstairs, and if you come to the edge of the balustrade you can look over and see if anyone is trying to hear what’s going on.”

Macdonald went downstairs and recovered his briefcase, and went into the small room where the telephone was installed. Closing the door, and making sure that the blackout was in place, he turned on a hand lamp and took the packet of Meta fuel out of his case, and an insufflator and fingerprint powder. He was an expert at reading prints. Having sprayed some powder over the box, he blew away the surplus powder and studied the results. There was a very clear set of fingerprints on the box—small fingers with clearly marked whorls, particularly on the thumb.

Macdonald had made it his business to collect fingerprints from all members of the Valehead household, and he knew their peculiarities. The prints on the box of Meta fuel were Mrs. Merrion’s, and no other prints at all appeared on it. There were certainly none of the professor’s.

Macdonald spent a full hour at the telephone. He talked to the night operator to begin with, saying who he was, and asking for his calls to be given priority. He also said that he wanted to find out if any call had been put through from Valehead House between six and seven o’clock that evening. The operator said that he would look in the records and see if he could trace anything—he himself had not been on duty at that time.

Macdonald's calls included cables to Professor Evans' club in New York, and to the police authorities in that city, asking for an appointment to be made so that the professor could be spoken to on the transatlantic service. Macdonald also spoke to the man on duty in his own department, and inquired if the photographs he had asked for were ready. On hearing that the prints were now ready, Macdonald put through yet another call and woke the long-suffering Jenkins.

"Sorry to wake you, Jenkins, but you're darned lucky to be in bed at all. Any luck with the Missions to Seamen or any of your Rotherhithe toughs?"

"I think I'm on the track. It'll mean a visit to Bristol tomorrow."

"Oh, will it. Very convenient of Bristol to be on the G.W.R. I've a job in Reading for you tomorrow. You've got my report and you know what I'm after. Take those photographs with you to Reading and see if you have any luck with porters or ticket inspectors or platform men. Worry the lot of them. The trains in question are the ten-thirty from Enster to Paddington, which stops at Reading at one-ten, the ten-forty and eleven-thirty, Paddington to Reading, and the one-thirty, Paddington to Enster, due at Reading at two-twenty. You can try the Paddington men, too."

"Right. Kind of you to let me know in good time, chief. I'll do my best."

Macdonald laughed. "You sleep-loving old blackguard! It's now half past three, and I've been telephoning for over an hour while you have been snoring. You can have another three hours in bed. By that time you can get up and start pestering the railway authorities. If you give them time, they will probably produce the men you want from the different ends of their system."

Jenkins' cheerful chuckle sounded over the wire. "All right, all right. I know the up line from the down line, chief, even though I do love my bed when I've a chance to sleep in it, which isn't often when I'm on the trail with you. How's things your end? Anything to justify your hunch?"

"Oh, a spot of alarm and battery, and few more pebbles on the bedroom floor, if you take me. I think the thing's sorting itself out. It's always useful when a fellow gets annoyed and takes to his fists. Incidentally, I think that the adjourned inquest may be called again for the day after tomorrow."

“Good work. I’d better exert my best powers of persuasion at Reading tomorrow. I take it that’s more important than Bristol?”

“You take it right. Well, pleasant dreams. Tell your missis I’m sorry if the phone woke her up, but she shouldn’t have married a policeman.”

When he finally left the telephone, Macdonald stood in the hall of the house and listened for a moment. Everything was very still, only the inevitable grandfather clock ticking the minutes away solemnly, tick-tack, tick-tack, grunt . . . as the old mechanism wound on and the weights descended, millimeter by millimeter. Macdonald stretched himself and indulged in the luxury of a prolonged yawn. He was sleepy, and he would have been glad of a brew of tea or coffee to clear his head, but he had respect for other people’s rations. Tea was tea, these days, a commodity to be treated with respect. He went into the kitchen and got a glass of cold water, smoked a cigarette while he sat on the kitchen table and swung his legs idly, forgetting his case for a moment while he wished that he were twenty again and back in the London Scottish as he had been in 1914. The marmalade-colored cat came out of his corner and purred around Macdonald’s feet, and the homely, shining kitchen seemed ridiculously far away from the general routine of criminal detection.

Macdonald jumped off the table and started to explore the kitchen, opening doors and cupboards while the cat prowled purring around him in an ecstasy of expectation. He left the kitchen and continued to explore the vast stone-floored regions behind it. Scullery, pantry, butler’s pantry—boot cleaning, metal cleaning, log store, coal store, flagged passages without end; at last he found what he was looking for—where the tools were kept. Carter was a neat fellow; his tools and nails and screws were all tidily sorted and conveniently placed. Wire for fuses, adapters, two-way plugs, everything that could be needed for the handy man in the way of electricity, and some coils of flex, still on their drums. “That seems to settle that. Everything ready for use,” said Macdonald to himself.

It was between four and five o’clock, British summer time, that Macdonald finished all he intended to do that night, and he decided to have a couple of hours’ sleep. Just then he heard the cock crow, and something made him go outside, into the cool, sweet air of the summer night. He stood on the terrace in front of the long house and turned toward the east. The

great tree-crowned scarp above the Hermit's Cave showed black, for the northeastern sky was paling to dawn—the first pallor which heralds a midsummer morn spreading behind the blackness of hill and forest. In the west a waning moon shone on the long white house, and silvered the little dome above the main hall. All about him was the scent of flowers, roses and honeysuckle, syringa and jasmine. Somewhere, down in the valley, a rabbit squealed, caught in a trap, and an owl hooted mournfully.

Regretfully Macdonald turned back again and reentered the sleeping house.



13

As was only to be expected, the affairs of Valehead House had proved a rich topic of conversation at the inn. The licensee at the Valehead Arms found business was booming—he had not had such a busy time since the Jubilee, so he told his wife. Mrs. Yeo demurred at this.

“Then there was the coronation, and there was September 3rd, 1939,” she said.

“Aye, maybe, but we never ran out of cider neither of them times,” objected Ebenezer Yeo.

“And cider wasn’t rationed neither,” retorted his better half.

Despite the cider shortage—and for draught cider to run out in a Devonsire inn was an epoch-making event in itself—folk continued to crowd into the bar. The locals of Valehead were outnumbered by visitors from all the surrounding country, as far afield as Tawton and Starford Abbas. The story of the wealthy Mrs. Merrion, of her father, his secretary and the men who were guests at Valehead was told again and again. “They volks to Vale’ead” were discussed in detail by many who had never set eyes on the place, and it was fortunate for Eve Merrion that three miles of road and gasoline rationing were between Valehead House and the inquirers in the bar. Excited comment reached its climax when it was rumored that Carter had been arrested, and the general verdict was that a mistake had been made. Carter, alone of the residents at Valehead House, was known to the locals in the bar and to mine host. He had not infrequently trudged to the village for the pleasure of a game of darts and some genial conversation, and he was popular, for Carter was a good mixer and had a fund of stories to tell. “A proper man, he be,” was the general verdict. “Now if so be it had been that little varmint of an Irishman, I could have understood mun better,”

put in one old gaffer, and old Timothy Hodge, the thatcher, gave it as his opinion that Scotland Yard was a “danged fule.” “Our Inspector Turner now, he’d never’ve made a mistake like that,” he affirmed. “These yere Londoners, they’re too full of themselves to see straight.”

“Iss. Mun’s right,” agreed the bar.

The fact that Brady had never come near the village was regarded as suspect. “Man must have had summat to hide,” was the opinion.

The most popular informants were those members of the village who, “on their lawful occasions,” had been up to Valehead House, and had opportunity to observe the residents there at first hand. Among these fortunate persons was Tom Briggs, the forester who had helped Carter to carry the professor back to the house. While the cider had lasted Tom Briggs had been sure of as many pints as he could lower in return for his narrative. He upheld Carter very strongly.

“Mun was fair cut to the ’eart,” he declared.

The other first hand informants were the van drivers of the local tradesmen who had delivered goods at the back door, and the village postman, who had delivered letters at the front door. The latter was quite a crony of Carter’s and spoke up strongly for him. He was also attached to Mrs. Merrion, whom he regarded as “a proper lady,” but he shook his head over Keston, “summat queer about him, talked like as he was on stilts,” averred the postman.

The older habitues in the bar talked with the rich Devon accent and the age-old idioms which their forefathers had used in Tudor times; the younger men scorned the local dialect and interlarded their speech with words and phrases culled from the talkies.

On the same evening that Macdonald had traveled back from London to Enster, Inspector Turner had come into the bar, but his unaccustomed presence had chilled conversation. He had not been able to break down the polite reserve which afflicted even the most garrulous. Turner had always held himself rather aloof from the village gossips and, though they respected him, they were a little in awe of him. Perhaps he made it a little too obvious that he had questions to ask, and the village folk were cautious in his presence.

On the following evening, Turner being absent, talk flowed again fast and furious. There were several strangers in the bar, among whom was an alert looking dark fellow, obviously a townsman from his complexion and clothes, who followed the conversation with intense interest. One or two of the village lads had been airing their opinions, and at last the townsman spoke up, his Cockney voice sounding thin in contrast to the Devon voices, which Lockersley had once described as “rich with cow dung.”

“You know, you’re all very ready to give an opinion, and it’s not for me to say you’re wrong,” he put in, “but it’s not much use talking about people you don’t know, who you’ve never seen.”

“That’s all fine and large, mate,” put in one of the hands from the local garage. “Ever seen ’em yourself, by any chance? Perhaps you can put us all right.”

There was a murmur of assent from the company, and one or two derisive snorts. The Cockney was not at all put out of countenance. He lighted another cigarette, saying:

“Well, it so happens I have seen them. I’m a mechanic from Quex radio, and a very pretty line it is. Nothing to equal it, but it wants a spot of care and attention, being a sensitive set.” He paused, evidently enjoying the fact that he had gained the ear of the bar. “Know what sort of radio Mrs. Merrion’s got at Valehead, mate?” he inquired of the garage mechanic. No answer was forthcoming, and there was a rhetorical pause before the radio mechanic continued, “Well, she’s got a Super Quex, and a lovely set it is, and she had a spot of bother with it after she moved it from town. Now Mrs. Merrion’s one of those topnotchers who likes things just so, and to cut a long story short, she wrote to the firm asking for an expert to come down at her own expense—fares paid, stay the night and all that. See?”

“And you were the expert,” agreed the garage man, with the air of a man who has solved a knotty problem. “Nice little holiday, eh, mate?”

“Okay by me. I enjoyed it. Not half,” said the Cockney cheerfully. “The firm’s kept me down here, traveling on business. Wish it might last, but it won’t. So, you see, as it happens, I *have* been in Valehead House. Spent the night there, too, and saw the two blokes who were staying there, and that chap Keston. Like an owl, he is. Now, you were saying,” and the speaker turned to the garage man, “the London cops have hit on Carter, and why

Carter? Why shouldn't it have been one of the nobs? I always see red a bit when the cops go for a working man rather than the kippered aristocracy."

"That's as may be. Don't hold with all this Jack's as good as his master talk we get these days," put in one of the farmers, but another young man chipped in eagerly:

"That's what I been saying all along. Take those two chaps who was out all night when the old gentleman was done in—Keston and Lockersley, wasn't it?"

"Now, then, Jem, you got that wrong. You wasn't at the inquest," corrected the thatcher. "They wasn't out *all* night."

"Well, most of it, anyway," protested Jem.

The Quex radio man turned to him. "Pity you missed the inquest, mate, and you so interested," he said sympathetically.

"'E was up in Lunnon town, seeing 'is brother in hospital," explained another voice.

"Well, if so be 'e 'adn't been in London, 'e couldn't have been gallivanting to no inquests," said the thatcher. "Driving Beer's van he is." He turned good-humoredly toward Jem. "Been fancying yourself as a detective, young fellow. You'd better go to that London policeman and ask him to take you back to Scotland Yard. I'll speak for you, Jem. I'll speak for you," he said.

The Quex man turned to the affronted Jem.

"Some of us likes to think things out a bit for ourselves, mate, don't we?" he inquired. "Quite right, too. Never know when we may be called for a jury ourselves."

"Ha, ha! That be good. That be very good," chuckled one old farm laborer. "Our Jem on a jury. Maybe they'll make mun coroner before they be through."

"Maybe they will, Gran'dad," said the Cockney good-humoredly, and turned again to Jem.

"Ever driven your van up to Valehead House, mate?"

"Me? I tell you I go up there every week. Wednesday mornings," replied Jem. "I seen 'em all at one time or another. The professor and Mr.

Keston, and Mrs. Merrion *and* her sister, and the Carters and the Bradys and that fellow Lockersley. I tell you I seen 'em all," he protested.

"Yes. I get you. You'd take your outfit up the drive," said the Cockney, "and you can see the terrace where they all like to sit."

"That's right," said Jem, and the thatcher put in:

"Yes. You seen them sitting on the terrace, and so you knows who did what, like a praper detective."

"Oh, I'm fed up with all your jaw," said Jem indignantly. "I tell you I noticed a thing or two, and I'm not telling any of you," and with that he made for the door. The Cockney followed him out amid good-tempered laughter from the older locals.

"Counts hisself one o' they brains trusts," said the thatcher, and there was a roar of delighted approval at the witty sally.

"That be good, that be," wheezed the old farm laborer. "Our Jem on the brains trust. Not that I ever 'eakened to no brains trust," he added. "I got me own brains to trust, and they kep' me right sides up so far as be."

Jem, cooling his indignation in the pleasant evening air, was joined by his Cockney upholder.

"Real hundred per cent hayseeds in there," said the latter. "I can't follow their lingo. Gets me beat. Now see here, mate. I been trying to remember all those people up at Valehead, and I've got mixed a bit. Seen a lot of people lately, and my memory isn't all that. Just put me wise a bit. I remember the old professor with the white hair—fine old chap he was—and that Keston—like a toy on wires, all jumpy. Dark chap with glasses, going gray a bit. That's right, isn't it?"

"Gray? Not so much as to notice. P'raps a few gray hairs, but he's dark and thin and jumpy. I saw him talking to Mrs. Carter one day."

"Okay. Then this Lockersley. He's a big chap, isn't he, rather colorless."

"Yes, he's a big chap, but he's plenty of color. Dark hair and eyes."

"No, no, mate. You got that wrong. Wasn't he the fair chap?"

"No. I tell you he's not. I saw him one day tinkering with the car. I asked Mr. Carter who he was, and he said, 'That's Mr. Lockersley. He's a poet.'"

“Well, seems one of us must be wrong,” said the Cockney. “Sure you haven’t forgotten, mate?”

“No. I damn well *haven’t* forgotten,” said Jem indignantly. “If you’re going to tell me I can’t remember what I saw, I’ll sock you one for yourself.

“That’s okay, mate. No offense meant, and none taken I hope,” replied the Cockney.

Half an hour later Detective Reeves, impersonator of a non-existent mechanic from Quex Radio, Ltd., was reporting the conversation in the bar and outside it to Chief Inspector Macdonald. By this time Reeves was picking up a fair imitation of a Devonshire accent, though his voice was too thin for it. “Iss, feggs. That be,” he said complacently. Reeves was a man of many parts.

WHEN Bruce Rhodian received a summons to attend the adjourned inquest on Professor Crewdon's death he was surprised and somewhat irritated.

"Why the devil do they want to make me go down there to attend an inquiry and answer questions about an event which happened while I was in London?" he demanded. "They've arrested that chap Carter, apparently. Caught red-handed."

Rhodian had been talking to Mrs. Merrion on the telephone, and shortly afterward another call came through from Macdonald.

"I expect you were surprised to get a summons for the inquest," he said. "We want to put in some evidence about that incident in the cave, when Keston dropped a live match on some dead leaves. Lockersley is still laid up, and can't give evidence, so we are calling you."

"Be damned to you—just when I'm busy," grumbled Rhodian. "Couldn't Keston give evidence on that point?"

"He probably will, but we want corroborative evidence."

"So ho! It's not so simple as it appears," commented Rhodian. "Do you mean to imply that there's still any doubt—about the upshot?"

"I can't discuss it over the phone, but I'll outline the case to you when you come down here. It's easier to explain things on the spot," answered Macdonald.

"Good. I'll hold you to that," replied the other. "If I travel by the one-thirty tomorrow, will you be free in the evening—say about eight o'clock?"

"Certainly. Incidentally, shall I reserve you a room at the inn? I take it you won't be staying at Valehead House."

"Oh—thanks, but why the assumption?"

“Mrs. Merrion has had a lot of worry, and she’s still got Lockersley ill in the house, and Keston looking as though he’s going to have a nervous breakdown. Quite frankly, I should advise the inn.”

Rhodian gave a whistle. “I say, you know, you’ve started me guessing again. I thought it was all cut and dried.”

“Not for me to cut and dry. That’s for the jury. They give the verdict—according to the evidence. Anyway, I’ll tell the Valehead Arms to keep a room. You can always cancel it if you don’t want it.”

“Yes, I promised I’d run over the evidence with you, but not here, I think. The whole village is agog, and if someone doesn’t try listening at keyholes I’m no judge of village inns. I’ll run you out to Valehead, and tell you my notions of things with the cave to demonstrate in.”

Macdonald was speaking to Rhodian just outside the village inn. On the small green close by a group of idlers stared at the two men. Macdonald was in his car, and Rhodian got in beside him.

“Thanks, I’ll be only too glad to come and hear your dissertation,” he said. “It’s true that I didn’t know old Crewdon, but I do know his daughter—pretty well—and having stayed in the house I’m naturally intensely interested in it all. One can’t help speculating, even though it’s a grim, cold-blooded business trying to spot a murderer.”

“Did you come to any conclusion of your own as a result of your observations, before and after the event?”

Macdonald tilted the sunshade on his windshield as he spoke, for the evening sun was shining directly at them as they drove along the narrow road.

“Not to say conclusions,” replied Rhodian. “I kept on jumping from one idea to the other. Keston always struck me as a rum bird; he was obviously nervy to the nth degree, ready to jump at a shadow, and disposed to suspect everybody. I didn’t much care for his snooping habits, either. He was always snooping around, coming up behind one unexpectedly and peering at everything suspiciously. He loathes Lockersley like stink, of course. I always expected they’d go for one another and have a real rough and tumble. I know Mrs. Merrion thinks a lot of Keston, but I disliked him somehow, even before all this happened.”

He paused to light a cigarette and then went on: "I'm honestly surprised about Carter. I'd have put him down as an honest fellow, stupid in some ways, but reliable *au fond*. The only time when he surprised me was on that evening when I found you and Lockersley and Keston in the cave. I'd been out walking in the woods—it was a gorgeous evening—and when I was coming back I met Carter. He was prowling round in one of the byways, and when I met him he gave me the feeling that he was all het-up, like a cat on hot bricks. Not what you'd have expected from a tough like him. We walked down to the side of the stream opposite the cave; you remember there's a bridge over the narrow end of the lake there—and we saw a glimmer of light in the mouth of the cave. I'll admit it was pretty ghostly. One second the place had been all black shadows, perfectly quiet, and then suddenly the arched entrance appeared, faintly luminous, light against the surrounding dimness. I'm not superstitious, and I don't take any stock in spooks, but I tell you it made my scalp prickle. Carter fairly dropped his bundle, so to speak, and yowled like a banshee, calling on all the gods in the alphabet to save him. He simply footed it up the hill. It didn't seem unnatural at the time, because that glimmering light did look pretty startling—but thinking it over, I couldn't make out why a big, hard-boiled bloke like Carter should have given way to plain blue funk, unless his conscience pricked him some."

"He's probably superstitious—all sailors are. However, it didn't affect you to the point of making you bolt."

"Lord, no! Fear doesn't affect me like that. When I'm afraid I get angry and butt into things. That light in the cave had rattled me, so I went hell for leather to discover what it was, and found your circus. It puzzled me a lot, and Keston wasn't forthcoming on the way home. He never spoke a word, and he was shaking like a man with malaria on him. When I got indoors I went and looked for Carter. He'd got outside a few drinks by that time, and was inclined to be quarrelsome when I chipped him about running away. It was after that that Lockersley made his famous boast: 'I know who did it, and how they did it, and I think I know why they did it.' It struck me as a silly thing to say at the time. I suppose Carter must have been listening in. It was Carter who laid out Lockersley, wasn't it?"

"It was. Carter was the only person in the house who had the fists to do it."

“Poor silly mutt! He ought to have had sense enough to know that he couldn’t help himself that way. Still, I suppose he was desperate.”

“He was frightened, and a frightened man often gives himself away.”

“True enough. Had you actually decided he was your man before he kindly provided the evidence?”

“No. I had an open mind. It was possible to make out a case against several people, as you have been saying.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Mrs. Stamford was involved? It was odd—everything seemed to start going crackers, as soon as she turned up here, and she was neck to neck with Keston when it came to nerves.”

“She certainly got rattled. Well, here we are. I’ll park the car at the side. It’s not in the way.”

Macdonald and Rhodian strolled into the green gloom of the cave, and Macdonald said, “Sit down and wait until your eyes get used to the light. It’s confusing after the sunshine.”

He lighted a cigarette himself and Rhodian sat down on the hermit’s bed. Macdonald went on:

“By the way, you remember mentioning the idea of Meta fuel? I did find a packet of the stuff in the professor’s bedroom. It was curious, because I didn’t remember seeing it there when I first looked round the room. Can you call to mind the circumstances when Mrs. Merrion mentioned the idea to you?”

“It was the day I came back here to fetch my traps—after tea. I went along to the lake with her to see the hydrangeas, and she talked about it then.”

“Do you think anyone could have overheard you?”

“I don’t know. . . . I suppose they could. We weren’t shouting, obviously, but neither were we whispering. I didn’t see anybody about—oh, wait a minute. Keston materialized out of the trees a little later, looking a bit madder than usual. He yelled out something, telling Mrs. Merrion not to slip, or some rubbish of that kind.”

“I see. I wondered a bit. I had collected some of the ashes on the floor, under the brazier, when I first came in here. I had them analyzed. There was

no sign of Meta fuel having been used, but a later lot I scraped up showed some vestiges of it. However, it's not a major point. Now about your evidence regarding the smoke when Keston dropped a match. Just watch for a moment."

Macdonald struck a match and threw it on the floor; the flame ignited some dry leaves, and the smoke curled up and then bent and floated out of the cave's entrance, as his own cigarette smoke had been doing.

"Yes. That's right," said Rhodian, and Macdonald tossed his cigarette down, saying, "Wait a moment." He then walked over to the lancet slit and stood with his back against it, saying, "Look again."

The smoke no longer cleared away. It hung in the still air and gradually began to fill the cave. Rhodian gave an exclamation. "Hell! Who'd have imagined that that slit made so much difference. It's uncanny!"

"It is, rather. I first noticed it by accident. Now when you and Keston and Lockersley were in here together, did any one of you stand with his back against that window?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't remember, anyway. I should have noticed about the smoke, and I didn't notice."

"Right. I wanted to get that clear, because it's a question which will almost certainly be asked. The evidence of all three of you will be taken."

"How can Lockersley give evidence tomorrow if he's sick?"

"He can't appear in the witness box, but he wrote a statement for me a day or two ago. It was an interesting document, because he set down every detail about that evening which he remembered, from the time Mrs. Stamford first came into the garden, including any conversation which he overheard or in which he took part. That statement will have to serve in lieu of his spoken evidence."

"I see. I should be interested to read it, and to see if our recollections tally."

"I dare say you can read it. Anyway, to get on with the story. As you know, the professor lay down on that slab where you are sitting, and there he met his death, by inhaling carbon monoxide. The overwhelming probability is that the gas was produced from glowing charcoal, and that the natural ventilation of the cave was tampered with."

Rhodian got up from his place and took a step over toward the rocky recess where the brazier stood.

“Don’t touch it,” said Macdonald. “It’s possible the jury may come out here for a demonstration.”

“I don’t think I’ve got you right. Do you mean that the old man lighted the brazier himself, and the murderer merely bunged up the window slit?”

“No. I don’t mean that at all. Professor Crewdon knew too much about the lethal properties of charcoal to light it in a cave. It’s quite possible that even the draught which goes through this cave would not be enough to clear out all traces of such a deadly gas as carbon monoxide, with whose properties the professor was quite familiar.”

“Then you’re still up against the problem of how the charcoal was ignited?”

“No. I don’t think so. I admit the problem seemed a hard one at first glance, especially when one took into account that the professor was one of those people who woke up immediately anyone came into his room. The real problem was to discover a method of igniting the charcoal without entering the cave at all.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me. It’s just impossible.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t. It’s quite easy. It can be done with a minimum of apparatus, and very little preparation. If you will lie down on that slab, I will go outside the cave, and within three minutes I’ll guarantee that the cave will be filled with fumes, without my entering it.”

Rhodian wiped his forehead. “It sounds devilish to me, like witchcraft.”

“No. Not witchcraft. The mechanics of it are the commonplaces of everyday use. I found everything that I needed to hand in Valehead House—on Carter’s bench, in particular. He’s a neat and handy fellow.”

Rhodian laughed. “You mean he actually left his booby trap lying there?”

“If you like to call it a booby trap. Now wait and see. I’m going outside the cave. It’s true that I shall lean against the lancet from the outside. You’ll notice that, because it’s daylight now, but you wouldn’t have been aware of it in the dark. One of my men tried it out when Lockersley was here the other night; and Lockersley noticed nothing. Keston butted in a little too

early for the experiment to have had full value, but it was good enough. Now you just wait there, on the hermit's bed."

Rhodian did as Macdonald bade him. The C.I.D. man waited until Rhodian was stretched out on the stone slab, and then he, Macdonald, went outside. There was complete silence in the cave, save for the whispering of the wind in the trees, the murmur of falling water, and the occasional chirrup of birds. The golden light of evening shone in at the cave's entrance, so that to eyes accustomed to light within every unevenness in the red rocky surface showed clear. The half-light of the cave seemed to be dimmed a little further as the lancet slit was obscured from outside, and then a trail of smoke began to issue, wraithlike, from the recess where the brazier stood. As though called into being by some witchcraft or mystic incantation, the faint coils of smoke spiraled up into the still air of the cave and hung there below the rocky vault. Coil after coil went up, like incense, fragrant smoke rising from dead leaves without any visible reason for its existence. Above the hermit's bed the roof of the cave seemed to descend as the smoke settled, lower and lower, beneath the rocky vault.

Rhodian lay staring upward, watching the blue coils spreading out into wraithlike fantasy. Like some mist or miasma, rising from a swamp, the smoke ceiling gradually descended until it was within a foot of his own face, and he suddenly sprang up and made a dive for the open archway and the golden light beyond.

Macdonald was standing outside the cave, and he saw Rhodian lurch toward the entrance. The chief inspector's voice sounded more matter of fact than ever when he spoke.

"That might be described as a good demonstration. I take it you don't feel skeptical any longer about the possibility of achieving the desired result without going into the cave?"

"How the hell did you do it? It's a foul business—the sight of that smoke sinking lower and lower. . . ." Rhodian's voice was shaking, but Macdonald's was as even as ever.

"Yes. The sight of the smoke is unnerving, but smoke is harmless. That night when the professor died there was nothing to see. Carbon monoxide

has not the visible qualities of smoke, but it must have behaved very much as the smoke did just now, rising at first, driven up by the heat, then slowly sinking until all the air in the cave was diffused with it. As to how it was done, use your common sense. It's easy enough."

Rhodian shook his head and turned and looked at the entrance to the cave. The smoke was pouring out of it now, rising above the point of the arch, fanned by a breeze from the once more open lancet.

"I haven't the least idea," he said. "I'm not good at puzzles. It beats me altogether."

Macdonald shrugged his shoulders.

"And you're said to be the world's most ingenious traveler when it comes to improvising things to get you out of difficulties," he said. "If your life depended on it, I think you'd sort this problem out in a very short time. Look at the under side of the great arch there, where the entrance gates used to be. What is that fixture in the center?"

"Where the electric light used to be."

"An electric cable and fixture, still connected with the house current. You can easily find out if it's in use by the simple expedient of fitting a bulb. The fixture is all right, the current is there. Now come inside the cave again. The smoke has cleared off now."

He motioned Rhodian to precede him, and they went back into the cave. It was still full of the pungent smell of burned leaves, but not unpleasant to breathe. Macdonald went toward the recess and shifted some leaves that lay in the shadow. His right hand pulled at a line of flex, invisible against the dark rock, and he pulled out a small electric stove.

"All very simple," he said. "You connect your flex with the fitment in the entrance arch by an adapter. You put your stove in here and pile up charcoal against the bars, being very careful to put enough charcoal to conceal any glow made by the fire. You put the flex from the stove through the lancet, and then you wait. When you have seen your victim arrive, you wait for an hour or so, and then you connect up the two ends of the flex by another adapter, and then you wait again. Of course, the lancet has to be—bunged up, as you said. Perhaps the arch to the entrance of the cave was bunged up too. You may remember that Carter used the wicket gate which once secured the cave to carry the body to the house. It must all have

seemed very easy. The murderer did not even have to go inside the cave to remove the stove. It's quite small. You can pull it through the lancet by the flex. Of course, this would have scattered the charcoal and upset the brazier, but that wouldn't have mattered. As for the sound it made, a dead man does not hear. The charcoal was trampled all over the place the next morning—again, that did not matter.”

“The devilment of it!” Rhodian said at last. “The very simplicity of the thing is diabolical.”

“Simple and workmanlike, as all good planning should be,” said Macdonald. “Also, it involved a minimum of risk. If it didn't go according to plan, the murderer could bolt away into the dark, leaving a puzzled professor to puzzle over the intrusion of an electric stove into his cave. If it did go according to plan, the risk of discovery was also very slight. The stove used belonged to the house—it was taken from Lockersley's room, I think. The end of the flex on that one had recently been cut, the ends are still fresh and shining. A length of flex was also cut from Lockersley's hand lamp. In fact, it seems plain enough that Lockersley was meant as scapegoat. Curiously enough, other pointers indicated him as culprit, too. He was out all night—or most of the night—when the murder occurred; the first glimpse I had of him was in the hall of the house, when he stood by the box which holds the electric switches, those switches which control the lights in the drive and at the main entrance—”

Rhodian gave an exclamation. “Look here, I may be a fool, I've shown you often enough that I *am* a fool, but I can't help seeing that these things you've said about Lockersley look pretty damning. Are you dead certain that you've got the right man in Carter? Do you really think Carter would have been bright enough to think out the charcoal and electric stove stunt? Does a man like Carter know that charcoal gives off carbon monoxide when it burns? Hell and Hades! Isn't the whole thing much more characteristic of a man like Lockersley, or isn't there even a chance that he and Carter worked it together? What about those damned diamonds that Mrs. Stamford was always harping about? Say if the pair of them—Carter and Lockersley—stole them, and then planned the murder.”

“I haven't formulated a charge against Carter, nor taken out a warrant for his arrest, without what we call ‘due care and attention,’ ” said

Macdonald; “in other words, without having concrete evidence to charge him on, but the whole motive of this crime is very involved. Incidentally, it’s getting dark in here. I seem to have been very long-winded. Would you rather come out and sit in the car while I talk about the motive part of the business? It’d be more comfortable.”

“No, I’d rather stay and talk about it here. It’s true that I loathe this damned cave, but there seems to be a certain fitness about hearing you work out your reconstruction in here. It has a dramatic fitness.”

“Yes. That’s quite true. I don’t often ponder over the dramatic fitness of things when I’m on a job—I leave that to the writing confraternity. Lockersley would say that our presence here conformed to a pattern, all events being pattern-making. However, we might as well sit down. I’m afraid I shall be a bit involved, but I warned you that the story was an involved one.”

“ALL murder prosecutions depend on three factors,” said Macdonald. “Means, motive, opportunity. You can put them in any order you like. Motive often seems most important, but if you find yourself unable to prove the means and the opportunity, you have no case. In this case, I think the means need not be disputed. That electric stove has got scratches on it such as would have been made when it was dragged out through the lancet, and there was enough pulverized charcoal in it to satisfy any jury that it had been packed under a heap of the stuff. The freshly cut end of the flex is another point. So much for means. Now, as to opportunity. In this murder the presence of the murderer was essential, and that not for a brief time—not the few minutes required to fire a shot, or stab, or strangle—but for some considerable length of time. Now, owing to the circumstances of that particular night, several people in the Valehead household were known to be up and about when they would have normally been in their beds. Lockersley was on the moor, owing to the mist—a difficult statement to prove or to disprove. Keston was out to look for him—a seemingly unreasonable thing to do, but again, difficult to disprove. Carter sat up in the kitchen to wait for the two men who were out. All that can be said decisively on that point is that he was in the kitchen when Lockersley returned.”

“According to Lockersley,” put in Rhodian, and Macdonald agreed.

“Yes. According to Lockersley. Brady was in his bed for at any rate part of the time between eleven o’clock and two o’clock. Now it is difficult to say that any one of them had not opportunity. All could have used the means I have outlined. For that matter, both Mrs. Merrion and Mrs. Stamford could be said to have shared the means and the opportunity. The deciding factor was motive, or so it seemed to me.”

As Macdonald talked the light was gradually fading. The sun had set, and the world outside was losing its colors. The heavy beech branches were dark and motionless against a pale, clear sky, the lake seen as a shining band of light through the arch of the cave. His back against the rock, the detective went on in his quiet, even voice:

“Motive to murder their father seemed to me to be lacking in the one case and totally inadequate in the other, so far as his daughters were concerned. That they *could* have done it was clear, but any reason for doing it did not exist, so far as I could see. Next, as to Keston. His motive could have been profit, a desire to inherit the sum left him under the professor’s will, but in view of the man’s record, it seemed unlikely. To my mind, it did not make sense; in addition to which, a man of Keston’s nervous disposition was hardly likely to have achieved success over such a grim task as murder. He would have fumbled and made a mess of it. Apart from his scholarliness, of which others assure me, he seems a futile sort of man: good-hearted, capable of devotion, but singularly stupid. Next, Lockersley.”

“Yes. Lockersley isn’t stupid,” said Rhodian, and his voice sounded grim.

“No. Lockersley isn’t stupid. Far from it. He is acute, observant and unusually accurate, what I should describe as an exceedingly able fellow. As you have noted, he had the best opportunity of anyone in the house, and the means were ready to his hand. A case against him is further reinforced by the fact that one of the stolen diamonds was found in his pocket, others on his bedroom floor. The motive to ascribe to him would be purely that of the thief. He had stolen, and he murdered to get away with it. Does that strike you as a satisfactory case against a man of Lockersley’s type?”

“No. Not altogether, but there may have been some other motive which you haven’t fathomed.”

“There may; I shall be getting back to motive later. A word about Carter. I think there is no doubt that Carter was the original thief of the diamonds. I have been going into his record, and it is not so blameless as Mrs. Merrion imagined. Carter may have hoped that the diamonds would never be missed, that no record of them remained, and he may have lost his head and sunk deeper into crime than he originally intended. It’s quite certain that it was Carter who attacked Lockersley. Now, having got thus far, I want to consider the matter from quite another angle. It is this. Why did Professor

Crewdon suddenly change his plans and return home a day earlier than he intended?”

Rhodian gave an exclamation of surprise.

“But what has that got to do with it?”

“I think it is an essential of the case. Crewdon was not a casual nor impetuous man. He broke a dinner appointment in order to get home one day earlier. I feel sure that he did not do this without a cause, and it seems probable to me that the *cause* was something, or some person, here at Valehead. Somebody he had to see, in order to set his own mind at rest. That is a guess, of course, but I think it will prove to have been a good guess.”

There was silence for a few seconds, and then Rhodian asked: “Well? Go on. I’m no good—at guessing.”

“Who—or what—could it have been that brought him back? Certainly not news of the loss of his diamonds. Who could have informed him of that? Had he some unexpected news of one of his daughter’s guests? Did he want to see Lockersley—and warn him off, to put it simply. Certain it is that Lockersley’s absence on the moor enabled him to avoid being seen by the professor. Another curious point emerged in the inquiry. An anonymous letter was sent to the police stating that Lockersley was seen on the same train as that by which the professor traveled to Enster. A lot of inquiries have been made of the railway officials, and the letter writer has been traced, but I think the real answer to my question was given in Lockersley’s own statement which he wrote out for me. I said you could read it. A torchlight is rather inadequate, and it isn’t really necessary for you to read it. You must remember the incident quite well?”

“What incident? Why can’t you get on with it? This drawn-out business defeats me altogether.”

“Does it? You said just now that there was a certain dramatic fitness in unraveling the story here in this cave, and I agreed with you. I am told that the professor used to say that the meditations of previous occupants conditioned certain places. Perhaps *his* meditations linger on here. I don’t know, but there is a certain justice in working out this story here. Do you remember walking to the cave with Lockersley, the first time you saw it, and do you remember him talking to you, quoting the professor?”

“As we walked? No, I don’t remember.”

“Think again. Lockersley claims to have a good memory. I think he’s right.”

“I can’t imagine what you are driving at.”

“I am asking you to remember, because I think that the gist of that conversation was identical with the cause which brought the professor back from town one day early. He had been dining with Professor Evans—you will remember him. I have been cabling to him, and I hope to talk with him over the telephone shortly. I think that he and Professor Crewdon were talking about a young man named Trent, once a friend of Bruce Rhodian’s. Lockersley said to you, as you walked to this cave, ‘The professor knew Martin Trent, and was talking about him.’”

There was a sudden dead silence. Macdonald’s voice had ceased abruptly. In the half-dark beside him, Bruce Rhodian was panting as a dog might pant on a hot day. Macdonald suddenly spoke again, clearly and sharply.

“My guess is this. Martin Trent is here, in this cave. Bruce Rhodian died, as Professor Crewdon died—”

He broke off as the man beside him suddenly sprang up and made a dive for the entrance of the cave, meaning to plunge out into the gloom of the twilit woods. Another figure darkened the mouth of the cave, and Rhodian turned like a flash, facing Macdonald.

“That for you, devil take you—a present from Martin Trent.”

The roar of the pistol filled the cave, but the shot went high. Reeves, at the cave’s entrance, had struck up the hand holding the Colt, and he had gripped the other hand and swung it around behind his captive’s back, in the ju jitsu hold which renders a powerful man impotent. There was a few seconds’ wild struggle, as the captive twisted like an eel, slipped and finally fell against the angle of the entrance arch, his head thudding against the stone, so that he fell suddenly limp.

“Well, it seems you guessed right,” said Reeves soberly, “but what damned fools these clever bluffers are when they see they’re bowled out. They always damn themselves at the end.”

“They lose their temper and their nerve simultaneously,” said Macdonald. “I’ve been sitting here beside this chap, knowing he’d a pistol

in his pocket, and certain that he would use it before the evening was out. I think he knew his game was up when I showed him the trick he had played with the electric stove, but he went on trying to persuade me that it was Lockersley who did it. Did you hear him say, 'When I'm afraid I get angry, and butt into things'? That was a true word spoken of himself. He was afraid, and he murdered Crewdon. He was afraid again just now, and he tried to shoot me. It doesn't always come off."

The unconscious man stirred uneasily on the rocky floor, and Reeves produced a pair of handcuffs.

"We can take him back in the car, but he'll probably start kicking before long. Nothing like making sure."

Between them the two detectives lifted their captive and carried him back to the car. Reeves sat beside him at the back, and Macdonald drove. As the sound of the engine and the glimmer of the masked headlight died away in the distance, silence and darkness settled on the Valehead woods. The entrance to the Hermit's Cave was but a blacker blot in the shadows, and an owl hooted mournfully above the wooded scarp.

MACDONALD was sitting with Mrs. Merrion and David Lockersley on the terrace at Valehead. Below them, by the river, yellow water iris stood by the stream like golden sentinels, and the scent of roses came in wafts on the breeze. The hot sun was tempered by a cool breeze, and the whole valley, set between its wooded scarps, was rich and sweet with the glory of an English midsummer.

“I think Mr. Lockersley guessed his way along, rather as I guessed mine,” said Macdonald, “though he was rather put out of his stride by the complication of the diamond theft.”

“Yes. I thought it was part and parcel of the whole thing,” said Lockersley, “and I admit that I believed Keston had deliberately put that stone in my pocket. This confused me and I went astray. I can just remember Carter before he hit me, standing by the cupboard, and I had a sudden flash of illumination, as one seems to have in dreams sometimes, when one says, ‘Now I can see it all,’ just before darkness comes down again.”

Mrs. Merrion sighed, and Macdonald said to her, “You are still puzzled. You want to get the whole problem sorted out, and then you can put it behind you.”

She nodded. “Yes. I want to know exactly what happened, so that I’ve never got to wake up and wonder again.” She paused a minute and then added, “I’m not going to let all this poison Valehead for me. I know my sister thinks I’m inhuman, but I still love this place as much as ever. It’s not that I wasn’t fond of Father. I was, very. I shall miss him, but I do know that he died peacefully, without any pain or distress; and the rest can be

forgotten, just like a bad dream. I want you to tell me exactly what happened, so that my mind needn't ever worry about it again."

"Exactly, and if there's anything you don't understand, stop me, and I will try to explain. Now when you met Bruce Rhodian in London, he told you that he had read your father's books, and wanted to meet him, and you asked him if he would like to come to see Valehead, and he agreed. That is all quite plain and simple. The complication was this. Two men, Bruce Rhodian and Martin Trent, did a transcontinental journey which has since become famous. They started in Northern Peru, and finished at Rio de Janeiro, but only one of them lived to complete the journey. That one was the man whom we knew as Bruce Rhodian. Martin Trent was reported to have died of fever in the jungle. The real facts of the matter were that Rhodian died, and Martin Trent assumed his name and claimed to be Rhodian, and claimed, too, the MS. description of the journey which has since been published, here and in America, and the films and other records which had very great value. The impersonation was done for the commonest and meanest of all motives—love of money and prestige. I won't bother you with a description of the circumstances which made that impersonation possible. It doesn't matter so far as this narrative is concerned. What does matter is that Martin Trent, known to you and to everybody else as Bruce Rhodian, came to stay at Valehead, and that Lockersley here said to him, 'Professor Crewdon knew Martin Trent when he was a young man in one of the American universities, and is looking forward to talking to you about him.' Imagine for a moment what this meant to the impostor. He had come to England ostensibly to enlist, knowing that the chances of his fraud being discovered were very small here. Neither he nor his companion had been at all famous before their journey. Rhodian—as I shall continue to call him for simplicity's sake—had stolen another man's work and the very large profit accruing therefrom. He had taken all the credit for a piece of planning and endurance and daring which had been the result of another man's brains and determination. He was sunning himself in admiration, and expecting to make a large sum of money from the film companies. He saw himself discredited, shown up as a cheat, possibly something worse, by that one brief statement of Lockersley's."

"Yes," said Lockersley slowly, "and he never batted an eyelid. He just changed the subject, and showed an intelligent interest in the Hermit's

Cave.”

“Very intelligent,” said Macdonald dryly. “I think he started planning the minute he saw it. He was not going to lose everything without fighting for it. Professor Crewdon was, so far as he knew, the one man in England who could say, ‘But *you* are Martin Trent, not Rhodian at all.’ Now to get down to the very simple mechanics of the matter. There was charcoal in the cave. Rhodian knew all about charcoal. He had been brought up in Latin American, where charcoal stoves are common. He knew that the professor slept in the cave. Those two facts got him planning, and he planned very quickly. He saw all the possibilities of an electric stove connected to the wiring at the entrance. He determined on two things. He would go away before the professor arrived at Valehead, and he would fix an alibi with his friend Belton, but he would be back at Valehead to watch for his opportunity. The only preparations he had to make were these: to lower the switch which controlled the light at the entrance gate and to secrete a small electric stove near the cave. Additional flex to cover the distance from the electric fitting to the cave had also to be obtained.”

“He must have had a facer when he heard the professor was coming back a day earlier,” said Lockersley, and Macdonald nodded.

“Yes, but he was lucky. Belton put through a call to him, and he was able to give some swiftly thought out instructions. I’ll go back to that later. In the interim, he told Mrs. Merrion that he must go up to town the next morning, but would come down again to meet the professor in a few days’ time. He took the stove from Mr. Lockersley’s room, and cut some of the flex from his reading lamp. Even then he was planning to have a scapegoat, though he could not have foreseen how other complications were going to help him.”

Lockersley gave an indignant grunt. “Why did they all fix on me?” he demanded disgustedly. “Do I look such a fool?”

“It’s because you are a poet, and poets are known to be temperamental,” said Mrs. Merrion, and there was the hint of a smile in her eyes.

Macdonald replied quite calmly, “As a matter of fact, you look a much bigger fool than you are. It’s much better to do that than the converse. However, to get on with the story. Rhodian caught the nine twenty-five from Starford, and traveled in it as far as Reading, where the train stops for some minutes. Here he met Belton, whom he had instructed to meet him

when he telephoned the previous evening. Rhodian told Belton what had happened—they are accomplices in deriving profit from the impersonation business. Belton, who is not unlike Rhodian, put on the latter's light raincoat, took his suitcase, with its noticeable steamship labels, and traveled back to Paddington on the same train Rhodian had traveled in from Starford, and gave up Rhodian's ticket at Paddington, so that if a check-up of tickets was ordered—a commonplace in police procedure—everything should be in order. Rhodian then calmly waited, and boarded the Enster train on which the professor was to travel, Belton having given him an Enster ticket."

"But why did he do that?" demanded Eve, and Macdonald explained.

"Rhodian was intending to murder a man whom he had not seen for many years and did not clearly remember. A risky undertaking. He *had* seen the portrait of the professor in the dining room, and he wanted to make sure he could recognize him again. He walked along the corridor of the train until he spotted the man he wanted, taking care that he was himself unseen. The professor got out at Enster, so did Rhodian. He saw him board the Starford train and could have read the name on the professor's suitcase. He knew him now, there was no possibility of mistake. Rhodian himself walked back to Valehead—he had plenty of time."

"How do you know all this?" inquired Eve.

"By a process of assumption to begin with, and later by painstaking proof. We got photographs of Rhodian and Belton, and Mr. Lockersley, too, for that matter, and one of my colleagues spent a weary day at Reading, worrying porters and ticket collectors and bookstall men and tea-trolley boys, and all the odd personalia of a station platform. Another odd incident clinched it. We received an anonymous letter saying that Mr. Lockersley had been seen on the professor's train."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Lockersley indignantly, and Macdonald continued placidly:

"I got the inspector down here to trace the letter. He did so without much difficulty. People nearly always talk. The anonymous letter writer proved to be the driver of a local tradesman's van which often comes up the Valehead drive. This chap had seen 'one of the gentry' staying at the house, and had asked Carter who he was. Carter, without bothering overmuch, had replied, 'Oh, that was Mr. Lockersley. He's a poet.' In reality it was

Rhodian the driver had asked about. When photographs were produced, the matter was speedily cleared up. The van driver had been to London to see a brother in hospital, and saw Rhodian in the train on the way back, and obliged with an anonymous letter, only he confused the issue by giving Lockersley's name."

"It seems to me I've been lucky," said Lockersley. "I'd no idea how fishy I looked. Incidentally, did any of the railwaymen spot Rhodian's photograph?"

"Not railwaymen. Railwaywomen," replied Macdonald. "A muscular young lovely now employed as a porter saw both Rhodian and Belton at Reading. Another porter—also a woman—saw Rhodian alight from the Tawmouth train at Paddington on Thursday. He had walked to Ashampton, cross-country, and caught the train there."

"Crime is not so simple as it looks," murmured Lockersley. "You police take a lot of trouble."

"Some of us do," replied Macdonald. "Jenkins, the inspector who took the photographs round at Reading and Paddington, takes endless trouble. Well, now I think you can see exactly what happened. Rhodian got back to Valehead some time on the Wednesday evening, and fixed up his flex, and packed the stove with charcoal. He made arrangements to stop up the lancet and the cave entrance, probably covering the old wicket gate with a coat for the latter, and then waited. He would have seen the professor walk down the drive and go into the cave, and then waited until he thought it was time to switch on the stove." Macdonald paused a moment and then added, "Of course, Rhodian could not have been certain that the professor would choose to spend that particular night in the cave, but Mrs. Stamford had told me in an unguarded moment that Mrs. Merrion had made some comment implying her own certainty that the professor would sleep in the cave as soon as he got back. This opened up several lines of thought, but it explained Rhodian's determination to try out his scheme on the Wednesday night. Obviously, the more quickly he was able to act, the easier for him to cook an alibi with Belton's aid. The longer he had to wait, the more risk he ran of not being able to explain where he had been in the interim." He turned to Lockersley. "When you were in the cave for my experiment I had the stove turned on. You noticed nothing, except that you felt the temperature rise a bit, but that may have been nerves."

“I should say it might. I never went through quite such a grim performance in my life. I tell you I was sweating with terror. . . .”

Macdonald bent toward Eve Merrion. She was leaning forward in her chair, her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “This has been a horrible recital for you. You said that you wanted to know, and I have tried to tell it objectively, as though it had happened to someone else.”

“Don’t be sorry. You have been as kind as anyone could be, all the time,” she replied. “I *did* want to know, and I’m grateful to you for telling me everything so plainly. Now I feel I can put it all behind me. I’m not going to sorrow over my father. He was happy, and he died happily, in his sleep, without knowing pain or fear.” She got up from her chair. “I’m not going to go on thinking about it, or talking about it,” she said. “I realize what morbid thinking and talking can do when I see the state my sister got herself into. Heavens, I nearly went mad, thinking she knew something about it. I’m very grateful to you for telling me everything so plainly. My father would have been grateful, too, and I think he would have been satisfied over the way he died, because his death caused a lie to be exposed. . . . Now I’m going to forget all this. I’m going to have the children here in the holidays, and they can play and shout and run wild all over the valley, and play hide and seek in the Hermit’s Cave if they want to. What I won’t do is to let sorrow and fear spoil this place. It’s a lovely place!”

“It’s the loveliest place I have ever seen,” replied Macdonald, “and I hope from now on you will be happy in it, and make the garden blossom as a rose.”

Eve Merrion went back into the house, and Macdonald returned to Lockersley.

“That woman has more common sense and more natural generosity than any other woman I have ever met,” said Lockersley. “Do you know she is keeping on Mrs. Carter here, as though nothing had ever happened? And now will you tell me about those infernal diamonds?”

Macdonald laughed a little. “Yes. Those infernal diamonds. They put me off my stroke at first. Carter, you may be interested to know, was jailed

in the States for thieving years ago. He was an able seaman, and got discharged for theft, and was finally repatriated here. We have traced his record, but it took a long time. He got a job as caretaker, and later houseman, and he had been going straight for years. Then, unfortunately, he heard the professor talking about his diamonds to Keston. It was too much for Carter's honesty. He searched until he found them, and took them. Unfortunately for him, he timed his theft just before the professor's death, and then he got in a panic. He knew the house might be searched, and he dared not be found with the stones in his possession. He first thought of burying them, but was afraid that with the police about the place he would be spotted. He wanted to return them, but the very day he hit on this grand idea, I turned up. He was then more panic-stricken than ever, feeling he would be caught red-handed. He hit on the idea of putting them in the pocket of your dinner jacket, thinking he could recover them after I had left the house. It seemed to him that it was a good idea to let them be found in some pocket not his own. He put them in your pocket, and later he recovered them, save for one which he left behind by accident, being flurried, as he told me. The evening you went upstairs and found him at your cupboard, he was searching for the one he had lost, like the lady in the scriptures. When you appeared, rather too quietly, he had actually got the other stones in his hand, and was counting them as a child might count. He has a very simple mind. Then he saw you, and *you* had seen the stones in his hand. His reaction was very simple—'hit first and think afterwards.' He did, with disastrous results. I found the diamonds scattered about the bedroom floor later. He had been too upset to pick them up."

Lockersley laughed aloud. "That's a good piece of comic relief. Silly old fool, that Carter. If he'd thought for a moment he could have realized that those stones would bring him nothing but trouble. He was lucky they didn't bring him worse trouble. You must surely have thought that the diamonds were an intrinsic part of the mystery."

"At first glance it appeared so, but, thinking it out, I was less certain. Keston had one of his lucid moments when he said that he couldn't see any point in the thief who stole the diamonds murdering the professor. In fact, one might say that the professor's death insured the discovery of the theft. Once his affairs were gone into in a police investigation the matter of the diamonds would inevitably come to light. However, I was bound to regard the two crimes as connected at first. I think I first came to the conclusion

that they were not connected when I read your statement, after finding one of the stones in your pocket. I did wonder if Keston were trying to plant evidence, but I never seriously believed in his guilt, and it was very difficult to consider him as a thief. Carter or Brady seemed much more likely suspects in that direction. I was certain that it was Carter as soon as I had found that you were knocked out. Brady was obviously incapable of that performance. When I considered that Carter was a likely thief, I didn't much favor the idea that he was responsible for the murder. It was too ingenious. Carter is a clumsy fellow."

"One other point. What about that packet of Meta fuel Mrs. Merrion was talking about?"

"That was a red herring of Rhodian's, when he was casting about in his mind for a useful explanation. He suggested that the professor lighted the charcoal by means of Meta fuel. Mrs. Merrion caught at the suggestion; she thought it was quite possible, and she remembered that her father had had some of the fuel. She went to his room to look for it, and found a box in his compactum. She took it out and put it on his wash stand, meaning to tell me about it. I found it there, and was interested, knowing that it had not been in the room when I first searched. The most interesting point about it was that the only fingerprints on the Meta packet were Mrs. Merrion's own. I'm pretty sure that Rhodian brought the packet with him from London, having wiped all fingerprints off it, and put it in the professor's bedroom for me to find. It was a futile proceeding, because if the professor had opened the packet, his fingerprints must have been found on it."

Lockersley gave a snort of indignation. "What a lowdown dirty cur that Rhodian-Trent blighter is! To murder a kindly old man was bad enough, but to produce evidence reflecting on Mrs. Merrion—trying to get her involved in his filthy crimes—God, that strikes me as unforgivable."

"Trent-Rhodian had only one intention—to make his way by fair means or foul. He also contrived to burn some of the Meta fuel in the cave, and saw to it that traces were left for me to discover—a belated afterthought on his part. He did his best to cast suspicion on everybody: on Keston, whom he said was always 'snooping around,' on you, on Carter. Incidentally, it's my turn to ask a few questions. When you gave me that statement, you had observed for yourself what the implication was so far as Rhodian was concerned?"

“Oh, yes. It was as plain as daylight. I thought of telling you about it, and then it occurred to me that it was much better to let the statement speak for itself. I wasn’t afraid you’d miss anything of that kind.”

“Thanks.”

Lockersley grinned at the dry tone, his heavy eyes lighted with a glimmer of impish amusement.

“If I wanted to pose as Sherlock Holmes cum Peter Wimsey, I should pretend that I’d seen the implication from the word go. Actually, I’d forgotten all about that casual conversation with Rhodian. It wasn’t until you told me to write everything down in detail that I dug it up out of my subconscious. It came back because I did exactly what you told me to do, starting at tea time on Tuesday, I made an effort to remember every word anyone spoke.”

“Very few people have the faculty of accurate recollection,” said Macdonald. “I asked Keston to do the same thing, and he was quite hopeless. He can only remember what he has read, things heard in casual conversation don’t stay in his mind. Another question: on the evening before Carter knocked you down, you telephoned to London, to a journalist on the *Morning News*. Were you trying to get private information about Rhodian?”

“Yes. The curiosity bug was working in my system, and I was feeling that I might be a swell at detection. I asked the chap to collect all that he could for me on the topic of Rhodian from the South American papers. It may have been an idiotic thing to do, but I’m no exception to human idiocy.”

“Your particular type of idiocy has been very useful to me,” replied Macdonald. “Well, I think we have covered all the ground, save for my conversation with Professor Evans. When he dined with Crewdon, Evans showed him some photographs—groups taken recently at a party in Oxford. Rhodian was in one of the groups. Crewdon spotted him, saying. ‘That fellow—why, it must be Martin Trent. He was a student of mine years ago . . .’ and then the fat was in the fire. The two learned men put their heads together, and Crewdon determined to go back to Valehead the next day to see Rhodian. He was much too scrupulous to mention his suspicions to anyone until he was sure of his ground.”

“He was a nice old chap,” said Lockersley soberly. “I’m glad Mrs. Merrion looks at things as she does, that there’s nothing to sorrow over in an old man’s passing, especially when he goes peacefully and painlessly.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Macdonald said:

“Yes, Mrs. Merrion is ‘rich in saving common sense,’ to quote one of our now despised Victorians, but she has had a rough time of it. I think her idea of having the children here for the holidays is a sound one. They will help her to forget. Keston is going to do some secretarial work for Professor Watlington, so he will be going away from here.”

“So I heard.” Again Lockersley grinned at Macdonald. “Did *you* organize that arrangement?”

“To some extent, yes. I thought it would be a relief to Mrs. Merrion not to have Keston brooding around the place, and good for him to be doing a job of work.”

“Quite. Have you organized a job for me, too?”

Macdonald chuckled. “No, young fella me lad, but I’ll drive you back to town on government petrol tomorrow. It’ll save you a tiresome railway journey. If you have nothing else to do, you can write a volume in *vers libre* embodying the idiom and opinions of Mrs. Briggs, charlady, of Camden Town.”

“Be damned! Are all our private lives open books to you?”

“Books at which I have glanced, and closed again. Books returned to the library shelf. No further concern of mine.”

“You just feel that Valehead will not be itself again until I—and Keston—and you have left it?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Macdonald got to his feet and stood looking across the sunlit valley.

“Things happen, but the place remains,” he said quietly, as though talking to himself. “Crime and punishment, wars and rumors of wars, yet the earth still brings forth its increase. Perhaps the nicest thing one can say about Mrs. Merrion is that she apprehends the beauty of this valley, and she won’t let it be spoiled for her by the errors of human beings.”

Lockersley nodded. “Yes, you old proser. You’re right in the main. All right, I’ll come back to London with you, but one day I shall sneak back

and sleep in the Hermit's Cave.”

“May you dream good dreams,” replied Macdonald.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Death Came Softly* by Edith Caroline Rivett (as E. C. R. Lorac)]